

UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE STRATEGIES OF
FAR-RIGHT EXTREMIST GROUPS IN THE UNITED STATES

by
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Abstract

Amid a concurrent rise of digital communication and far-right extremist groups in the United States, political violence has become increasingly more common and poses a larger threat to national security. Past research has shown that far-right armed social movements in the U.S. have been adept at navigating new digital mediums as they materialize from the early days of the Internet up to the modern day to aid in their overall goals. This study aims to determine if social media use as a tool has fundamentally changed the strategies that far-right groups employ and, if so, to what degree. Based on a review of the literature of the commonalities of successful armed social movements (ASMs) and the relationship far-right groups have with the Internet and its facets, a thematic cross-case analysis was done of four prominent far-right ASMs representing two distinct era of Internet history, pre- and post-social media. Analysis of all cases demonstrated that though post-social media groups modified previously successful strategies in order to connect with younger, more tech savvy audiences, the general types of strategies remained the same. The results indicate that far-right groups of all eras utilize identical strategies in different ways to best fit their particular needs and environment meaning that social media has not necessarily profoundly changed the way contemporary far-right extremist groups operate or the strategies they utilize.

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Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Literature Review</i>	<i>3</i>
Personal Motivations	3
Collective Motivations	5
Role of Social Media	8
Assessment of Past Research	10
<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Methodology</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Data</i>	<i>16</i>
Case Study #1: The National Alliance	16
Case Study #2: Aryan Nations	19
Case Study #3: The Proud Boys	21
Case Study #4: Patriot Prayer	24
<i>Analysis:</i>	<i>26</i>
Charismatic Leadership	26
Misinformation	28
Precarity and Comradery	29
Patterns and Methods of Recruitment	30
Overall Assessment	32
<i>Conclusion</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>35</i>
<i>Curriculum Vitae</i>	<i>42</i>

Introduction

A tumultuous 2020, underscored by widespread social and political unrest, left the United States (U.S.) no better off in 2021 which saw exceptionally high levels of scrutiny towards long held and highly respected institutions of American democracy not seen for generations. Though this turbulent nature of American society had been noted for some time, it culminated in the storming of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., on January 6th, 2021, an event that exposed the nation's weaknesses to both domestic and foreign audiences. This physical attack on American democracy was disproportionately carried out by far-right groups who for myriad reasons felt compelled to riot in the American capital. The relatively recent meteoric rise and proliferation far-right armed groups in the U.S. is a phenomenon that has seen government officials and institutions classify the issue as a grave security threat (Jones, 2018; Piazza, 2017; Schroeder, 2018). Several of these groups can be considered armed social movements (ASMs) which is the focus of past research on motivating factors and their link to group strategies. Defined by their propensity for violence in pursuit of a particular goal, U.S.-based groups include Atomwaffen Division, Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters, among others. This phenomenon has several social, political, and security implications, making the continuation of associated research of the utmost concern. Specifically, within this broad topic of research, the aim of this exploration is to enlighten readers as to the role that social media plays in affecting strategy of far-right groups in the U.S.

Understanding the operational capacity of relevant groups is key for policymakers as they seek to simultaneously impede recruitment efforts of such groups

and incorporate their supporters into a unified and thriving society. Foundational knowledge of group strategies that this research will build upon is thankfully expansive and will inform the reader of established motivating factors from decades of research. Subsequent review of literature will also show how social media both influences and is influenced by those factors, albeit in a more limited capacity. The following review of past research on ASMs covers a wide variety of topics with scholars coming to their conclusions through in-depth case studies of particular groups as well as more general inquiries of common themes ASMs typically display. Of particular importance, the research clearly shows that motivating factors can be divided into two main sections: collective and personal. Both establish how groups achieve success by highlighting the political, socio-cultural, economic, and ideological issues that are noted across several groups that span various decades and societies. By highlighting the motivational factors that aid relevant groups in their quest to grow the movement, this research study hopes to bring light to whether or not the strategies used in response to these proven motivations has changed significantly in the modern era following the introduction of digital tools such as social media.

Personal motivations will first be discussed below as they represent the core of established reasoning with the autonomy of the individual allowing them to decide their own fate. This will be followed by collective motivations which represent secondary, though equally important, influences. The two camps are bifurcated to stress their differences while also highlighting how they correlate. Finally, scholarly data of the role of social media will bring a more nuanced conversation to the forefront that emphasizes

how the Internet has changed our understanding of strategy for U.S.-based ASMs and identify where gaps in knowledge exist.

Literature Review

Personal Motivations

As mentioned above, a wide base of research exists on the incidence of ASMs. Much of this research is concerned with the overall dynamics of such groups with many scholars providing particularly acute insight into why people join these groups and how relevant groups utilize this information to grow their movement. These can be boiled down into one overarching theme: grievance (della Porta, 1995; della Porta and Diani, 2006; Gurr, 2011, Khosravinik, 2017; Lindholm and Zuquete, 2010; Piazza, 2017; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019). Characterized by their personal failures within the existing system, grievances may manifest in a number of political and socio-economic expressions such as perceived exclusion or loss of identity (della Porta and Diani, 2006; Gurr, 2011; Lindholm and Zuquete, 2010; Piazza, 2017). Khosravinik (2017), Piazza (2017) and Vitolo-Haddad (2019) note that socio-economic grievances arise from the negative perceptions of the individual in question who feels victimized, embarrassed, belittled or wronged in some way, feelings that are exploited by ASMs. These grievances can not only have a profound impact on an individual's perceptions about themselves and the world around them but will also influence their decision-making process moving forward. Therein lies an important link to the other noted category of grievance: political.

Perceived socio-economic injustices are in turn magnified when they are compounded with political ones. Political grievances are most often represented by a

strong disdain for domestic policy and a supposed inability to change those policies through legal political means by way of exclusion or repression of a group or ideology (della Porta, 1995; Gurr, 2011; Khosravini, 2017; Lindholm and Zuquete, 2010).

Unable to make political progress through conventional routes, individuals find solace in political groups that display more radical views that allow them to air their grievances over loss of industry or culture with guaranteed reassurance. Virtually all perceived and tangible grievances can be classified with either political or socio-economic descriptions. These greatly influence the individual in their quest for agency and meaning in a confusing and chaotic world; however, all personal motivations are not limited to grievance.

Social exclusion felt by prospective members of ASMs can sometimes be rectified by a massive change in lifestyle choices. Individuals with predisposing views may cure their boredom or misery by embarking on an exotic 'adventure' that pits them against perceived others and gives them a sense of community in an exclusive or secretive group with large aspirations (Gurr, 2011; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Kutner, 2020; Piazza, 2017, Vitolo-Haddad, 2019). The exhilaration of forgetting the world you know behind you to create one that more readily fits your own thoughts and actions is understandably tempting, especially for youth in dire situations. It is here where we see ASMs devise schemes centered around the discrepancy between one's personal ideology and the realities of the world. By positioning themselves along the boundary of accepted norms, ASMs prey on disillusioned individuals who feel compelled to join the fight in the struggle for the world (Gurr, 2011; Juergensmeyer, 2003). Though of less importance on its own as a motivating factor, the viability of grievances as motivators

can be boosted dramatically by charismatic leadership (Kutner, 2020; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019). The effectiveness in recruiting individuals who crave radical change that feature grandiose claims of revolution while simultaneously remaining exclusive cannot be understated when gifted speakers proselytize their message with efficiency. As noted above, personal motivations lay the foundations for collective motivations as will be seen in the next section.

Collective Motivations

The communal nature of the human race, when influenced by political and socio-economic grievances, profoundly impacts the strategies ASMs utilize to best reach the largest audience and/or convince outsiders of their message. It is a relatively simple task for leaders of ASMs to increase their support base when an individual thinks negatively of the changing world around them due to a perceived loss of lifestyle (i.e., culturally, morally or economically). The key to successfully earning new recruits is through the use of ideological framing that diagnose and assess pertinent issues and introduce constructive group motivations (della Porta and Diani, 2006; Gurr 2011; Lindholm and Zuquete, 2010). The main tenants of ideological framing are the diagnostic and prognostic elements and the motivational frames. Each of these allow the individual to clearly understand what views define a particular group and separate them from 'outside' groups. The first of these, the diagnostic element, can more simplistically be described as a quest for legitimacy and defining who is entitled to it (della Porta and Diani, 2006; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Lindholm and Zuquete, 2010). Groups employing the diagnostic element attempt to mimic the role of a healthcare provider by identifying important issues and making claims of how best to improve those

conditions. They attempt to define who is at fault for these issues and claim authority as the sole arbiter of truth and reconciliation who cannot achieve success through conventional means (della Porta, 1995; della Porta and Diani, 2006; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019). For ASMs attempting to radicalize their support base, this element most often manifests as misinformation/propaganda whose initial goal is to convince listeners of the group's warped reality. Such groups tend to make outlandish claims though are shielded from logical reasoning by subsequent sections of the framing triad.

The prognostic element is concerned with "seeking solutions, hypothesizing new social patterns, new ways of regulating relationships between groups, new articulations of consensus and of the exercise of power" (della Porta and Diani 2006, 77). This effects both external perceptions and internal organization of ASMs and lays a foundational understanding of what great marvels the future holds for those who commit themselves to the cause, a phenomenon noted across dozens of groups (della Porta and Diani, 2006; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Lindholm and Zuquete, 2010; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019). Evangelizing the cause adds a utopian element to the equation that hopes to "leap onto a new state of being in which contemporary values ... are totally transformed or turned upside down" (Lindholm and Zuquete 2010, 130). These groups seek to reestablish a golden age of existence that is wholly separate from the current system in place, whether it pertains to politics, morality or other grievances. By doing so, ASMs attempt to widen the divide between in- and out-groups to convince its audience that alternative paths are inadequate and only the group's ideology can lead towards

righteousness. The quest for this utopia of sorts plays into the final aspect of the discussion on collective factors, motivational frames.

This section is concerned with the reasoning behind armed resistance and the goals that groups set as a result. This section is key to persuading individuals to join as a group's motivational framing passionately illustrates how the world is inadequate while simultaneously demonstrating the achievability of the group's goals (della Porta and Diani, 2006; Gurr, 2011; Juergensmeyer, 2003). Creating goals for any task is certainly valuable though ASMs elevate the stakes by claiming their goals are impeded by outside forces that must be dealt with. This two-pronged approach is designed to bring agency and meaning to the organization to convince the individual that they found companionship in passionate, motivated and like-minded people with lofty yet realistic goals (della Porta and Diani, 2006; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Vitolo-Haddad, 2019). Although a group's radical motivational framing may seem like a farce to well-adjusted or satisfied people, individuals with an extensive list of grievances can be greatly affected by the words within these declarations due to the hope it brings them. People's need for community and belonging amid a gloomy outlook can drive an individual to take an extreme leap of faith in order to build relationships that were previously missing in their lives (Balch, 2006; Gurr, 2011; Juergensmeyer, 2003; Khosravini, 2017; Kutner, 2020). Finding a place to belong is among the most common motivations for joining ASMs both in historical and contemporary cases with ASMs taking full advantage of this by offering friendship, comradeship, meaning, and purpose. The weight that leaders' words carry is seemingly equally as important as developing strong social bonds among group members which in turn escalates their devotion to the cause.

Role of Social Media

With a comprehensive overview of motivating factors and how ASMs operationalize these established, it is time to shift the focus to how ASMs have incorporated online technology into their operations. Since the early days of dial-up through to the modern day, extremist groups have used online communication as a means of spreading propaganda and boosting its overall reach (Berger, 2019; Conway et al., 2019; Khosravinik, 2017; Prier, 2017; Thomas, 2021). From ASMs that are anti-government in nature to outright white supremacist organizations, the use of the Internet to spread extremist ideology has steadily increased over the past 30 years. ASMs have found themselves at the frontiers of the World Wide Web as it has evolved and become increasingly pervasive in everyday life. The ability to rapidly adjust to make for the most effective use of new technologies and platforms is noted by several scholars and serves far-right organizations greatly in their overall goals (Berger, 2019; Colley and Moore, 2020; Conway et al., 2019; Prier, 2017; Thomas, 2021). Some groups have even managed to manipulate a platform's algorithm to gain more notoriety in the online sphere (Colley and Moore, 2020; Prier, 2017). These skills are increasingly valuable amid the everchanging landscape of social media and the recent exodus of extremist rhetoric from mainstream platforms.

The extensive history of Internet usage by far-right organizations both in the U.S. and abroad is clear though it does not explain how such groups have seemingly become so prominent in the modern era. As progressive values take hold in many parts of the world and public acceptance of nationalist views decreases, an appetite for passionate discussion grows among grieving individuals. Herein lies the main culprit of

online fervor that has seen a dramatic shift that helped give rise to several contemporary extremist groups, social media's propensity to create and foster echo chamber communities (Colley and Moore, 2020; Conway et al., 2019; Khosravini, 2017; Kutner, 2020; Prier, 2017; Thomas, 2021). Websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube all use an algorithm known as a recommender system that is designed to maximize the time a user spends on a site by delivering targeted advertising and content (Diresta, 2018). A single 'liked' video or post (sometimes less) can spiral into a deep dive into radical, extremist ideology that is fed in a continual loop. What makes matters worse is that the communities these echo chambers foster tend to share increasingly extreme and misinformed content through private messenger apps and dedicated propaganda sites (Colley and Moore, 2020; Conway et al., 2019; Khosravini, 2017; Kutner, 2020). What began as a means of increasing site usage has had unintended negative consequences and continues to be an important issue for prominent social networking companies. At the same time, online entrepreneurs have taken advantage of this exodus of content by creating sites that explicitly support radical or conspiratorial views (i.e., 4chan and Telegram) that in turn accelerates the radicalization process of its users before they have even spoken to bona fide group members (Colley and Moore, 2020; Kutner, 2020).

A final important note to mention about social media use by extremist organizations is the difficulty with which researchers have been able to study them. This is most often a result of secretive or sanitized online discussions and the lampooning of extremist social media by group members/supporters themselves (Colley and Moore, 2020; Conway et al., 2019; Kutner, 2020; Thomas, 2021). Despite increased pressure

from law enforcement and the public, far-right ASMs in the U.S. have made great use of their adaptability to avoid detection and/or disclose misleading information.

Assessment of Past Research

This literature review clearly shows that there is consensus as to the main arguments for why people join ASMs and the methods their leaders use to manipulate their audience, with each factor presented receiving critical acclaim by most scholars. Personal and collective motivators are deeply influenced by political and socio-economic grievances that stem from a perceived loss of some sort. ASMs in turn mend their strategies to best account for these motivations through the use of misinformation and comradery. However, the limited scholarship of the effects of social media on group strategies prevents a meaningful consensus from emerging except that it is used extensively, and its proponents are skilled with this tool. This leaves several themes unexplored like the exact methods used in recruitment and whether or not a consensus exists of best practices regarding group strategies.

This collective case study research of prominent, far-right ASMs in the U.S. will attempt to fill in missing data regarding the effects of social media on group strategies. This will be completed through a deep dive into recruitment tactics of selected groups to understand what the current state of recruitment looks like and if it varies from group to group. The anticipated result of this research is that groups have revolutionized their repertoire of strategies post-social media and that unprecedented access to online information has motivated ASMs in the U.S. to reimagine what are the most appropriate strategies given this new medium.

Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that social media use has effectively altered the repertoire of strategies available to and utilized by far-right extremist groups in the United States (U.S.).

In what has become one of the most turbulent times in recent American history, far-right extremist groups have seemingly proliferated, with their respective ideologies plastered online and in print media following numerous incidents of politically fueled violence. Once limited by geographical area, highly interconnected networks are able to self-organize and spread propaganda in unprecedented ways thanks to the Internet. As seen above, far-right ASMs have evolved alongside the repertoire of online tools available to them. Though motivations to join such groups have seemingly remained constant over time, this paper argues that the introduction of social media has revitalized group interest in extraordinary ways and allowed new strategies of recruitment and propaganda spreading to take hold. This phenomenon in fact forced several mainstream social networking companies to reactively ban dozens of accounts, allowing lesser-known social network services to inherit their user bases (Andrews, 2021; Colley and Moore, 2020). The extensive list of personal and collective motivations for why people join ASMs is important in determining if and how social media has changed group strategies. Building off past research, this paper will provide the reader with in-depth analysis of multiple cases that contrast the effectiveness of general digital communication compared to substantive social media use in day-to-day operations. The materials and methods needed to conduct this collective case study will be presented

below and offer more context of measures used to determine if and how social media has fundamentally altered the operational capacity of ASMs in the U.S.

Methodology

The stated purpose of this research is to discover if ASMs have moved away from the strategies of their predecessors as a result of widespread social media use. Past research indicates that though a wealth of knowledge exists concerning why people join such groups and how their leaders utilize this knowledge, there is a gap when it comes to how social media has influenced ASM strategies in the past decade or so. This gap shows the need for research that seeks to illuminate the connections between two distinct phenomena, the concurrent rise of social media and far-right ASMs in the U.S. This research will allow for a more in-depth understanding of how and to what degree social media has influenced methods of recruitment and information sharing and will help inform policymakers and major tech companies in the pursuit of limiting the spread of extremist ideologies online. Without conducting such research, important data that may greatly influence the academic understanding of extremism in the context of the digital era would be lost on all of us.

The research plan will be conducted using qualitative methods to understand how different groups use different online tools to their advantage. To do this, the research will consist of applying cross-case analysis to multiple case studies on relevant organizations that espouse far-right extremist ideologies, with the specific aspect under examination being how these organizations currently use or historically have used the Internet. The goal is to determine what differences and/or similarities exist among the strategies that groups use before and after the introduction of social media as a tool in

the mid-2000s. Ensuring relevant groups acquired access to the Internet means that groups from the pre-social media era must have been active following the Internet's inception in 1989. Groups active following the creation of social media platforms will range from the late 2000s onward. Despite defining boundaries with which to focus this research, dozens of groups of varying size remain as potential cases. Chosen cases must have found some form of online success which may or may not represent the best practices to follow when navigating the digital sphere.

Drawing from this rationale, the first case will cover the National Alliance (NA), a white supremacist and neo-Nazi political organization founded in 1974 that grew significantly during the 1990s (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). The second case of the pre-social media era will cover Aryan Nations (AN), another white supremacist organization founded in 1973. The group gained a large following in the late 1970s and early 1980s, allowing their network to build an online presence before facing their own demise in the 1990s (Balch, 2006; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). These cases will illustrate how the NA and AN utilized the Internet during its early days while simultaneously seeking to explain what led to their downfall when similar groups grew their notoriety online. Understanding how groups function online without social media is just as important as understanding how they do with such a tool, making both groups important cases in the context of the above hypothesis.

The first case since the widespread use of social media will cover one of the most notorious far-right organizations currently operating in the U.S., the Proud Boys (PB). A neo-fascist, fraternal organization founded in 2016, the PB continually make national headlines for their presence at violent political rallies, including the storming of

the U.S. Capitol in January 2021 (Leatherby et al., 2021; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). The second group under study during this period is Patriot Prayer (PP), who are based in the Pacific Northwest U.S. and espouse right-wing anti-government views. The PB and PP are archetypal representations of far-right ASMs navigating social media to further their goals and as such will represent their fellow organizations as the third and fourth cases. The NA and AN, and the PB and PP, respectively, embody a specific time and technique of online recruitment that make them well-suited to this research. Fortunately, all cases demonstrated some form of group cohesion and online success where groups not chosen failed to do so, including the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) who are made up of several separate and rival groups as opposed to being a unified organization (Potok, 2016; Stack, 2017). This narrow scope of research will also in turn allow for more in-depth analysis of the groups themselves in addition to the themes that will be discovered in the analytical process.

The plethora of data under study will consist of news articles, archival documents, documentaries and interviews, group synopses, and other relevant articles from various academic journals, think tanks like the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that focus on extremism such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). A wide collection of data will better inform the research in hopes that it will shed light on what tangible changes can be seen in ASMs through heavy social media use if any exist. It will also inform the reader as to the benefits of Internet usage more generally and what similarities or differences can be determined between general web usage vis-à-vis extensive social media usage as a part of the Internet toolbox. Given the

research's hypothesis, the data will validate initial assumptions if groups under study have altered their fundamental principles in a significant way in terms of their means of communication, tools of recruitment and interactions with in- and out-groups to better synchronize with social media. This will be represented by a meaningful shift away from viable ASM strategies for the PB and PP in terms of framing and methods of recruitment. On the contrary, the data would disprove the hypothesis if it indicated that new age groups do not stray from strategies used by their predecessors in a meaningful way or only do so in a limited capacity. Data indicating that new age groups repurpose older strategies with only slight modifications will be considered evidence against the hypothesis. To determine if a meaningful shift has occurred, groups will be assessed based on their overall approach to growing the movement, with available details on the success of individual strategies and how they have impacted the movement as key factors. Despite the difficulty in studying these types of groups, which will be reflected in the data pool, the research should amass sufficient data to make for interesting conclusions.

Several definitions should be explained so as to clarify the relevance of data and help classify group strategies and use of digital media into their respective categories. For this paper, social media is distinct from other web services in that it consists mainly of interactive, user-generated content distributed through service-specific profiles (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Obar and Wildman, 2015). In contrast, websites or webservices that generate content but do not focus on content uploaded by their users nor prioritize the development of online social networks within the platform, i.e., newsletters, is not considered social media. The research below presents digital tools that vary broadly

from group to group, making this distinction important to consider in determining social media's role in answering the research question.

Recruitment in this context refers to the process of identifying and attracting candidates for any position within an organization. How this process is approached by ASMs varies broadly though the overall goal remains to strengthen the organization in terms of certified membership and passive outside support (della Porta and Diani, 2006; König, 1999). One popular and closely related method of attraction discussed extensively in this study is the spreading of propaganda. This method is a systematic effort to influence listeners through the use of subjective or false claims that encourage an emotional response, rather than a rational one, in pursuit of a specific agenda. Though these are distinct phenomena, think of propaganda spreading as merely a tool of recruitment when used by extremist groups since the end goal of their use is the same, to grow a movement that propagates a skewed worldview even if groups under study see their subjective claims as objective facts. A common premise displayed by groups under study is to circulate dubious claims of cultural destruction and imminent violent struggle and the subsequent need to join one's group to endure these supposed omens.

Data

Case Study #1: The National Alliance

The National Alliance (NA) was founded in 1974 by William Luther Pierce, who reworked a past extremist group, the National Youth Alliance (NYA) to fit his ambitions of an all-white enclave and eventual race war (Southern Poverty Law Center, 1999; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). Pierce quickly gained notoriety in white

supremacy circles for his eloquent rhetoric and gripping novels, namely the notorious *The Turner Diaries* which championed a violent armed revolution against groups that included Jews and non-whites (Shimbaum, 1996; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). This book alongside frequent radio shows and networking events that campaigned for a comparable armed struggle helped spread word of the organization pre- Internet and allowed the NA to amass a large following by the 1980s (Hilliard and Keith, 1999; Hosenball et al., 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). This was done by focusing on themes of white genocide and revenge for purported disproportionate influence held by Jewish people in the U.S. Pierce was initially able to reach a wider audience in part due to an alleged theft of a NYA mailing list before going on to publish *The Turner Diaries* and other novels (Southern Poverty Law Center, 1999). This message resonated with disenfranchised individuals who felt their culture was disappearing amid an influx of new age music, art, demographic makeups and political ideologies. Claims of media censorship by esoteric Jewish leaders to cover up a wave of poverty and crime caused by 'dark skinned' peoples were brought to life by the charisma of Pierce and validated what many white supremacists already felt thus drawing them to the organization (Hilliard and Keith, 1999; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021).

Pierce's ability to operationalize victimhood in the context of racist ideology greatly aided the NA's success and allowed the organization to seamlessly transition from traditional to digital media. Starting with bulletin board systems (BBSs) in 1984, which allowed for people to "gain 'dial-up' access to a variety of hate propaganda as well as information about [...] meetings and [other] details," the NA was quick to populate new mediums (Conway et al. 2019, 3). This was repeated in the 1990s

following the arrival of the Internet, though on a much larger scale. According to Pierce, the NA doubled its membership from 1990 to 1991 and again in 1992, mainly through audiocassettes and AM broadcasting as well as website simulcasting of radio shows (Hilliard and Keith, 1999; Southern Poverty Law Center, 1999). To add to this newfound success, the NA began advertising extremist content on websites like Stormfront, VDARE, and American Renaissance and embarked on several ventures from white-only dating sites to a white supremacist record label, Resistance Records, with both advertised extensively online (Conway et al., 2019; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). Despite no statistical evidence to confirm this surge, the use of radio as a propaganda and recruitment tool is deemed a turning point for Pierce in terms of overall reach when compared to the limited success of the NA's record label, dating service and web content (Hilliard and Keith, 1999; Southern Poverty Law Center, 1999). Pierce's radio shows helped extend the notion of an impending race war and the need to violently resist contemporary liberalism and racial integration to a much wider audience, which urged supporters to relocate to its West Virginia headquarters in preparation (Hosenball et al., 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, 1999).

Though all above methods were useful in their own right, what sustained the NA's prominence was its leader, William Luther Pierce. His ability to articulate his beliefs in ways that resonated with the masses combined with his knack for networking and innovation allowed the NA to grow into one of the world's most successful white supremacy groups by the turn of the millennium. That is why after Pierce's sudden death in 2002, and revelations of his elitism within the neo-Nazi ideology, the group

quickly splintered amid legal issues and disbanded entirely by 2013 (Potok, 2007; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021).

Case Study #2: Aryan Nations

Aryan Nations (AN) was founded in 1973 by Richard Girnt Butler as a fusion of neo-Nazi ideology and the Christian Identity movement which demonizes Jewish people as false descendants of ancient Israelites (Balch, 2006; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). Butler envisioned an Aryan proto state in the Pacific Northwest U.S. for the impending race war, headquartered north of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. There he established a compound that hosted a spectrum of white supremacists from biker gangs to skinheads to zealous families. Known for its acceptance of all types of white supremacists, AN gained a dedicated member core in the late 1970s and early 1980s in large part due to its ritualistic structure and adherence to warped, pious Christian values (Balch, 2006; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). The comradeship that events like the annual Aryan World Congress fostered was a huge draw for prospective recruits who often felt like outsiders and desperately desired a sense of community and order in their lives. This was compounded by Butler's extreme generosity, letting near strangers stay at the compound indefinitely, and hiring bands popular with skinheads to entertain during gatherings (Balch, 2006; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021).

Speaking of the 'evils' of Judaism and the eventual rise of the Aryan race, Butler amassed a community of racists that saw their own personal failures explained as something that was out of their control and could be mended by unwavering loyalty to AN (Balch, 2006). Pre-Internet strategies utilized by Butler and AN included dial up BBSs, extensive networking with similar groups, annual parades in the Coeur d'Alene

area, and regular visits to Pacific Northwest U.S. prisons, all of which was covered by various media outlets (Balch, 2006; Conway et al., 2019; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). Demonstrative of 'there's no such thing as bad publicity,' media attention paid to AN proved to be the group's greatest pre-Internet asset as opposed to its networking and penal visits whose reach was often limited by geographical area (Balch, 2006). During its peak in the early 1980s, regular attendees of AN religious events consisted of at least 50 adults and older teenagers with less frequent attendees numbering 30 to 40 people; numbers would balloon into the hundreds during concerts and other events (Balch, 2006). Core attendees were attracted to Butler's strict adherence to the seedline theory that claims the creation of two races following the Biblical fall of man which also served as the foundation of AN's pursuit of an all-white Christian state for the impending race war (Balch, 2006). Despite these positives, the organization was plagued by a lack of viable new members as core members were of an older generation and new generation skinheads came to view AN ideology as outdated (Balch, 2006). By the time the Internet became widely available, AN was a shell of its former self. Even when using digital media to upload hate-filled sermons to its website and that of Stormfront and VDARE, the group's most effective recruitment tool was the white power bands that attracted skinheads from around the country (Balch, 2006; Conway et al., 2019). This attraction to musical performances rather than Butler's monotonous preachings eventually forced AN to drop the bands due to fears of what prominent skinhead membership would mean for the organization, resulting in a mass exodus of younger followers with only some 20 core members by 1999 (Balch, 2006). Despite the advent of the Internet, AN relied heavily on entertainment (concerts) as a recruitment strategy

when its fringe Christian beliefs became increasingly rejected by younger white supremacists. Unable to inspire a younger generation and unwilling to morph its ideology, AN failed to use digital media effectively and experienced a steep decline long before Butler's passing in 2004.

Case Study #3: The Proud Boys

The Proud Boys (PB) was founded in 2016 by *Vice Media* co-founder Gavin McInnes who, through his incendiary comments and supposed charm and irony, has solidified his place as a right-wing figurehead in the 21st century (Kutner, 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). Framed as a source for male empowerment and self-improvement amid a supposed feminist assault on traditional values, the PB attract disenfranchised or disillusioned men hoping to improve their own circumstances as it relates to women, mental health and personal control (Kutner, 2020; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021). This particular ideological framing that PB leadership has chosen to exemplify encourages victimhood in potential recruits, blaming and condemning outside forces for myriad grievances and planting the idea that tangible change and personal growth are possible through dedication to the organization. Current and former PB members noted "counterculture appeal" in the face of progressive policies and "camaraderie and brotherhood" over a shared sense of uncertainty for the future as significant factors in motivating them to join (Kutner 2020, 22). Nearly all interview participants stated an appreciation for McInnes who was seen by many as more of a comedian rather than an ideologue (Kutner, 2020). A combination of McInnes' online persona and the hopeful message the PB preach captivates an audience of approximately 3,000 to 6,000 members, with interviewees citing McInnes as influential

in their decision to join the PB (Coutts, 2017; Kutner, 2020). This is in spite of McInnes having left the organization soon after its inception over ideological differences (Kutner, 2020; Marantz, 2017).

Established following the rise of social media, the PB thrive online. Videos and other posts gain traction through user interaction, go 'viral' and end up as content that recommender systems use to increase users' site time (Diresta, 2018; Prier, 2017). A compelling burly individual offering help to marginalized men is a tempting allure for many that starts the recruitment and radicalization process before the individual is aware of the plot. To add to the deception, PB's support base share inflammatory content about politics, religion, and social norms from less than reliable sources which accelerates the radicalization of observers and is also intended to provoke outsiders to build comradery in chatrooms and comment sections (Coaston, 2020; Colley and Moore, 2020; Kutner, 2020). Another noted strategy is DARVO (Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender) which further spreads propaganda that vilifies the groups' enemies and cyberbullies any dissenting commenters. (Kutner, 2020). This strategy is composed of PB members and supporters outright denying the claims of their discursive partner before aggressively targeting the online user's credibility, character, morals, or other personal traits in an attempt to discredit the account's owner. Finally, the last three steps of DARVO campaigns consist of shifting blame away from PB members and their support base over allegedly hateful speech and actions and onto the alleged victims of that speech and those actions. This has manifested as the blaming of outside groups like feminists and liberals for the failures in one's personal life or the political landscape that surrounds them. This tool is especially used when users claim in comment sections

that the teachings of PB target left-wing groups or individuals. Additionally, such a strategy strengthens the group dynamic as it further cements who has authority to speak on pertinent issues as well as the divide between in- and out-groups.

Past research's assertion of the difficulty in studying contemporary far-right groups is evident when assessing the most effective recruitment strategies of PB. Mass user bans and the subsequent migrations of PB content from prominent social media sites makes the distinction of one or more strategies difficult. Despite this obstacle, one story embodies how widespread social media use greatly impacts PB recruitment. Soon after a 2018 rally devolved into violence, six of the largest PB chapters reported an influx of 823 new members after videos of the incident were posted to Facebook and Twitter (Kozłowska, 2018). Around that time, primary PB accounts on Facebook and Twitter had more than 20,000 followers each meaning that every follower had an opportunity to spread content depicting a supposed assault on Western 'chauvinism' and male empowerment when in reality this incident was one of many that indicate PB content is modified to fit the organization's narrative (Coutts, 2017; Kutner, 2020; Moynihan, 2019; Reeve, 2020). Not only do viewers experience content like this that is representative of far-right propaganda, but they subsequently participate in one-sided discussions that corral like-minded individuals into comment sections through recommender systems. The defining characteristics of social media create the conditions for this medium to significantly impact PB recruitment efforts as social media allows for greater reach of PB content, fosters echo chambers that champion this alternative worldview, and creates online communities that influence offline strategies.

Case Study #4: Patriot Prayer

Patriot Prayer (PP), which was founded in 2016 by Joey Gibson, gained notoriety for its violent rallies in the Pacific Northwest, namely Portland, Oregon. Gibson acts as the central figure of the right-wing, anti-government PP, creating online fervor through claims of free speech suppression and proposed dialogue with opposition parties only to host street brawls against Antifa, a collection of decentralized, far-left organizations who vehemently oppose right-wing principles, on several occasions (Sparling, 2019; Thomas, 2018). The Christian-centric, anti-left group has shown itself to be more moderate compared to its contemporaries, inviting transgender speakers and expelling overt displays of white supremacy, though PP certainly pushes for a reversal of liberal attitudes and reimagined loyalty to “traditional Judeo-Christian values that defined the Christian Right over the past four decades” (Cooper and Lamont Jenkins 2019, 10). This disdain for the left amid a desired widespread return to Christian values has helped Gibson build a small dedicated force who are attracted to what can be viewed as a safe space for conservative views in a disproportionately liberal area of the country (Zielinski, 2019). The shared bond of finding like-minded people amidst massive opposition is an attractive proposition for prospective members. Support for the group is also positively influenced by Gibson’s turnaround from a high school dropout and delinquent to a charismatic family man and leader of the new right (Matarrese and Dake, 2017). Self-stylized as outsiders in their home region, the group seeks to provide community and agency for who those fear the loss of free speech and libertarian ideals (Cooper and Lamont Jenkins, 2019). The group’s rallies are clearly used as a means of releasing

these pent-up frustrations as several massive street brawls and even one death can be attributed to PP events (Sparling, 2019; Thomas, 2018).

Much like with the PB, videos of PP rallies are noted for recording brawls only after provoking left-wing counter-protesters (Coaston, 2020; Neiwert, 2017; Zielinski, 2019). Allied political commentators like Andy Ngo and enamored netizens perpetuate the narrative that the organization's members are victims of free speech suppression through edited clips posted on either unbanned Twitter and YouTube accounts or elsewhere on sites like Gab and Telegram (Coaston, 2020; Neiwert, 2017; Zielinski, 2019). By carefully planting seeds of misinformation, PP continually drums up support from online observers who amid a cycle of viral propaganda and echo chambers come to view the cause as a source of hope for their supposed gloomy reality. In the case of PP, its seemingly massive online presence does not necessarily translate to an equally large member pool as a 2019 undercover exposé indicated that the group only consisted of some 15 core members and partners with other organizations during large rallies (Zielinski, 2019). Though there is evidence that some people travel across the country to attend PP rallies, this seems to be the exception rather than the rule. More often, consumers of PP content are recruited to donate to polished funding campaigns advertised on social media under the false pretenses of liberty and acceptance (Matarrese and Dake, 2017; Kavanaugh, 2019). Despite not being reflected in its total membership, PP expertly uses social media to increase its funding and overall reach in ways that would have been unattainable in previous decades.

Analysis:

Several key themes can be identified as important that influence far-right activity in the U.S in the social media era. Many are noted across all four cases with more similarities seen among organizations within their respective period (pre- and post-social media). Among these, there are four major themes worth covering: charismatic leadership, misinformation, precarity and associated comradery, and patterns and methods of recruitment. Each is central to defining the success of all four groups to varying degrees and gives context as to how far-right groups operate in the modern era. This information will display some of the most effective strategies available to these groups and explain how some have solidified their standing in the far-right community while others have crumbled over time.

Charismatic Leadership

The most important aspect to the success of an ASM that was seen across all four cases is having a leader whose compelling rhetoric is matched by their welcoming personality. William Luther Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* and eloquent pattern of speech allowed him to persuade thousands of people to donate their time and money to the NA's cause to become the largest white supremacist organization in the U.S. at the turn of the millennium. After his death, the group splintered before eventually disbanding under fractured leadership. Interestingly enough the only uncharismatic leader under study is AN's Richard Girnt Butler who attracted more members through his generous giving rather than his actual message, which caused membership to gradually dwindle since its peak in the mid-1980s (Balch, 2006). The group's heyday came and went before the Internet was available to AN and though the Internet kept the organization

afloat for over a decade, the group had become a shell of itself by Butler's death in 2004. The group still technically operates though is definitively at its weakest point since its inception.

Noted with both groups in the social media era is the online clout of the movement's founder. Despite distancing himself from his brainchild, Gavin McInnes continues to inspire disenfranchised men who share similar though not identical views to join the PB through McInnes' content. As stated in interviews with PB members, most had been a fan of McInnes prior to joining and some were even unaware that he was involved in politics prior to their recruitment. The man is one of the central figureheads to the contemporary far-right and continues to charm unsuspecting individuals down a path of hateful, misogynistic rhetoric full of flat out lies. Supporters vilify anyone who speaks ill of him or his message on social media, further cementing his demagogue status. As for PP, Joey Gibson's supporters view him as a true 'rags to riches' story that brings hope to his fearful and disillusioned support base that validates his claims of a path towards righteousness through the organization. His skill for presenting polished material online under the guise of 'liberating conservatives' has helped PP gain prominence in the Pacific Northwest.

All these cases illustrate that without something substantial in terms of protection, hope, understanding or comradery to offer the masses, the long-term organizational survival of far-right ASMs is in doubt. In AN's case, where Butler failed to charm his support base he made up for in ideological framing and generous hospitality (more on this below). As for the other three organizations, the movement was brought to life by the passionate speech of its leader whose members thrive(d) off their dynamism. Given

that Pierce died at the age of 68, many of his NA peers were aging or already dead by that point. The movement was kept alive by Pierce's presence and the NA soon crumbled after it lost its ideological leader. Given this logic, the expiration of McInnes' (51) and Gibson's (37) fame may be a distant reality as each continues to share content through social media platforms willing to host these far-right celebrities.

Misinformation

Misinformation and the themes that follow are all present among all groups. The NA and AN perpetuated claims of white genocide, an impending war race, and unregulated control of Jews through traditional means like radio, networking conferences, and parades and other celebratory events before moving online using BBSs, simulcast radio, and digital archives of sermons and lectures. Both groups saw limited success on digital formats when compared to their most effective pre-Internet strategies. How the NA and AN used this new medium to their advantage differs greatly from that of the PB and PP.

Both new age organizations also heavily rely on misinformation campaigns to attract new recruits. However, as noted in the literature review, social networks' recommender systems have the unintended consequence of creating echo chambers in which users share misleading headlines and other content to convince their fellow netizens of a particular viewpoint. What's more is that unlike the NA and AN, new age groups employ more aggressive and targeted DARVO campaigns. When faced with opposition, members of new age groups flip the narrative to their favor and discredit their detractors by any means possible. Sometimes this is done without provocation in an attempt to play the victim role when getting a reaction before piling on expletives

against out-group commenters. Though techniques similar to modern DARVO campaigns had been utilized in the past, the scale at which this phenomenon occurs in the modern day is unprecedented. Further research could determine if these heated online discussions are a result of social media use or a more general sense of security due to the digital barrier.

Precarity and Comradery

Precarity is defined by an indisputable feeling of instability, uncertainty or the sense of being at-risk of losing something. This sentiment is emphasized in all four cases where leaders foster the idea that a certain group of people are faced with social, religious or cultural annihilation. Each spreads fear about the supposed realities of the world while simultaneously introducing their organization as a means of healing and protection. This fearmongering and demonization of outside groups paints the recruiting organization as a safe space meaning that the bonds formed after joining are strong and offer solace and community that is viewed as missing in the outside world. Though these strategies are common within all cases, the advent of social media has disproportionately helped newer organizations use this sensation in their recruitment efforts.

The PB and PP have boosted the utility of precarity and comradery through extensive misinformation campaigns that present an elaborate false reality. These feelings of insignificance or despair are magnified for individuals by a shared feeling of liberal bias in mainstream media and public discourse that ultimately makes the prospect of joining much more attractive (Cooper and Lamont Jenkins, 2019; Kutner, 2020). Comment sections full of individuals who echo one another's fears, grievances,

and desires can be directly attributed to the advent of social media which encourages a one-sided presentation of racial and social issues. The comradery this new medium promotes for online groups, not limited to far-right content, may be a determinant of the rate at which viewers form strong beliefs on a particular issue; further research should explore this theory in more depth. What is represented in the data however is that, once recruited, group members often feel a sense of relief and companionship that was missing from their lives thanks to the counterculture ideals shared by member and non-member netizens alike, a noted theme from past research. The aggressive DARVO strategy also encourages collective cyberbullying of out-groups that further strengthens the in-group dynamic when compared to the NA and AN who were not afforded this tool in the Internet's early days.

Patterns and Methods of Recruitment

As expected, the methods of recruitment changed drastically between before and after the birth of social media though certain patterns were common in all four cases. All groups portrayed themselves as victims of an unjust world and encouraged their listeners to think the same. This plays into the precarity aspect though it is distinct in that the supposed injustices were a direct attack on their way of life. From Judaism to feminism, whatever set of beliefs opposed the in-group was viewed as seeking to eradicate the far-right group in question. Framing one's struggle in this 'cosmic war' argument is noted in the literature review and serves to build revolutionary sentiment among the group's support base who view conflict as the only way towards salvation. Another noted pattern involved all groups using entertainment as a lure during recruitment. For pre-social media groups, this manifested most often as musical

performances with the NA even founding their own music label. This strategy proved effective in some cases though the reach of this tactic was limited in comparison to how new age groups use entertainment.

The PB are the more nefarious of the two new age cases as they subtly present themselves as a self-help group for men. The draw of improving one's personal circumstances by listening to and corresponding with men who have overcome similar issues in their lives can be an attractive prospect. This combined with the wit and comedic value likened to McInnes, many individuals are drawn toward the organization before knowing its full intentions or set of beliefs when compared to other groups under study. This could at least be a partial explanation for how the PB have amassed such a following in only five years.

Where the PB and PP find common ground is using street brawling against left-wing demonstrators as a lure. Those with negative views regarding groups like Antifa as well as left-wing policies more generally gravitate towards content that is a physical representation of fighting the left. This fight club-esque content is encouraged and has influenced group funding and contact with online recruiters. What is more is that digital images and videos that convey symbolic ideas of a particular phenomenon or theme, also known as memes, are shared widely in the new age community on all types of social media platforms which provide humor amidst the anger and dismay. The ways in which new age groups use entertainment to boost engagement greatly differs from their predecessors in terms of how to reach new audiences. Their ability to share diverse content to a number of popular platforms near instantaneously is in stark contrast to

groups like the NA and AN who found limited success using archaic forums and websites.

Overall Assessment

The above research indicates that there are mixed results in determining if social media actively changes the strategies that far-right ASMs in the U.S. employ. As stated in the literature review, ASMs are able to gain a foothold if they meet certain requirements regarding ideological framing, leadership, and consideration for grievances. Each of the four groups under study display an aptitude in incorporating these themes into their overall strategy which led to initial success with each. However, the way old and new age groups incorporate these themes vary slightly, with each modifying their strategies to best fit their specific scenario.

A number of interesting themes were discovered although the research's findings did not support its hypothesis. It would appear that the PB and PP repurpose reliable strategies like misinformation campaigns and framing a political struggle with an in-group/out-group dynamic much like how the NA and AN had done. All groups also use entertainment as a lure though what groups consider to be entertainment has changed quite a bit since the birth of social media. The Internet in general and social media in particular have influenced the behaviors of new age groups, which are characteristically more aggressive to out-groups. This new medium also certainly intensified online discourse of ideology, diluted the quality and accuracy of readily available news, created new forms of attraction, and allowed for extremist microcosms to inadvertently develop that thrive off of the community they build. Despite these adjustments, social media has not caused a major shift away from the strategies that made past ASMs

successful. The operational capacity of groups where social media use was prominent indicated a reiteration of past strategies designed to resonate with a younger, more tech savvy audience.

It can be argued that these cases do not accurately represent how all far-right ASMs may choose to navigate new mediums given how methods and results varied. PP's notoriety, for example, was not reflected in its total membership which starkly contrasts to how social media has helped the PB grow. As only two of the four groups represented successful social media campaigns, it is important to consider that other modern groups may find success through alternative routes. Future research into the relationship other new age groups have with social media should be explored and would bring focus to the role social media plays in influencing strategies of far-right groups more generally and if other determinants are more significant in the growth of online extremism.

Conclusion

In attempting to uncover the true value of social media for far-right ASMs in the U.S., the literature review found a number of common personal and collective motivations across various types of ASMs located worldwide. Additional past research indicated that far-right groups were highly capable of using digital media to further their overall goals as new mediums were introduced. To discover if social media did in fact impact these groups to the degree that was hypothesized, deep dives into the National Alliance (NA), Aryan Nations (AN), the Proud Boys (PB) and Patriot Prayer (PP) were used. Representing two distinct periods of Internet history, old and new age groups found more commonalities with each other than with groups of a different era; however,

many common themes were identified across all groups as well. Social media has seemingly modified how viable strategies can be used for recruitment, meaning that the spread of propaganda and the ways in which observers can be radicalized differ from the pre-social media era. However, in all, social media is but another tool for ASMs to employ viable strategies. Future research can build upon these findings to discover undeniable commonalities among extremist groups of all kinds, not just those with a right-wing bias. When doing so a broader exploration of modern extremist groups would be preferred to gain a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon and not just for some of its more notorious groups.

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Curriculum Vitae

Diego Maloney

EDUCATION

M.A, Global Security Studies, Johns Hopkins University, December 2021

B.A, Global Studies, Arizona State University, December 2017

Semester Abroad: Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain), August – December 2017

EMPLOYMENT HISTORY

Political and Security Analyst, Riskline ApS, July 2019 – Present

Marketing Specialist, Independent Contractor, March 2017 – February 2020

INTERNSHIPS

Intern Analyst, Riskline ApS, March – June 2018

Intern Program Coordinator, Phoenix Committee on Foreign Relations, February – August 2017

Media Manager, Fields of Growth (Kingston, Jamaica), June – August 2015

CERTIFICATIONS

Business Opportunities and Risks in a Globalized Economy, IE Business School, October 2018

Human Rights, Arizona State University, December 2017