



# ALBANY

## **Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism Messaging in the West**

**A Horizon Scanning Report**

# Summary

The tragic murder of ten African Americans in Buffalo, New York, on 14th May 2022 has been one of a rising number of terrorist attacks and/or incidents globally that have been motivated by Racially and Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism (REMVE). These have corresponded with a rise in the number of REMVE groups (a 320% increase from 2013-18).

According to Berlet and Vysotsky (2006) REMVE can be categorised into three main groups (although there is overlap): Political, Religious and Youth. But while their motivations may vary, the messaging and recruitment tactics are very similar.

Many of these incidents originated with online radicalisation through a number of fringe platforms; but the messages of disenfranchisement, a loss of white dominance and conspiratorial plots around immigration and "reverse racism" have become increasingly popular in the mainstream, and REMVEs have proven adept at coopting aspects of mainstream internet culture for their messaging.

Messaging still occurs through leafleting, literature and face-to-face interactions, but increasingly relies on Internet-based exposures and online recruitment interactions which now with the advent of social media, video chat, texting and online gaming contain the possibilities of increased intimacy.

Understanding the messaging and indoctrination of this messaging is the first step in devising a Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (PCVE) strategy and getting ahead of the curve before disparate groups form an international movement.

# The Great Replacement disinformation narrative

## Origins

- The disinformation narrative has its roots in early 20th century French nationalism and books by French nationalist and author Maurice Barres. However, it was French writer and critic Renaud Camus who popularized the phrase for today's audiences when he published an essay titled "Le Grand Replacement," or "the great replacement," in 2011.
- The narrative states despite contradictory evidence that "native Europeans" are being replaced in their countries by non-white immigrants from Africa and the Middle East, and the end result will be "the extinction of the white race."

## Appeal

- Often the targets of this disinformation are undefined "elites"; a broad term that encompasses fictional groups of liberals, political cabals, the Jewish people and, sometimes though not commonly, the Islamic community, which appeals across the diverse ideologies/targets of the REMVE spectrum. The common theme being that there is a growing existential threat to the white race.
- It is also a strong echo of the white supremacist rallying cry of 'the 14 words': "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children".
- Its focus on immigration allows it to piggy back on debates surrounding immigration which can mask REMVE rhetoric and find traction among the political mainstream.

## Adoption by pundits and politicians

- Numerous right-wing politicians and pundits have adopted The Great Replacement either officially or unofficially in their messaging.
  - In the US, in March 2017, then-GOP Congressman Steve King tweeted his support for Geert Wilders (an anti-immigration activist from Europe). "Wilders understands that culture and demographics are our destiny," the Congressman wrote. "We can't restore our civilization with somebody else's babies." Similarly, in July 2020, GOP Congressman Matt Gaetz claimed that an "attempted cultural genocide" was occurring in the US and that the left wanted to "replace America." Likewise, Fox News Host Tucker Carlson has frequently accused Democrats of driving demographic change to alter the ethnic makeup of the USA and stay in power.

# The Great Replacement disinformation narrative

- In Europe, Heinz-Christian Strache, campaigning for the Freedom Party of Austria ahead of the 2019 European Parliament election, endorsed the “great replacement” theory, while Marine Le Penn has continually made immigration central to her platform and alluded to themes present in the great replacement.
- It is difficult to ascertain whether these individuals truly believe this ideology or are using it for political/commercial gain; but regardless, many REMVE groups see it as legitimisation that they are "saying what others are too afraid to say." North American REMVEs in particular.

# REMVE Messaging in Mainstream Digital Culture

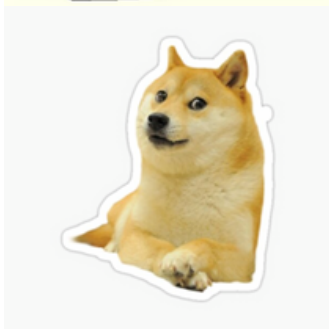
While adoption of replacement theory by pundits and politicians has been an important part of normalising REMVE messaging, groups have also gone to lengths to integrate themselves into mainstream digital culture.

## Memes

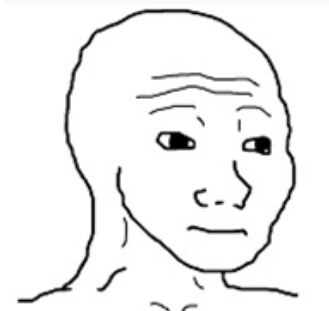
- Internet memes act here as a way of signaling belonging, since, by sharing or understanding particular memes, users signal their awareness of various right-wing norms, thereby creating a community accessible only to those with the appropriate understanding - effectively an inside joke.
- Internet memes, whether explicitly violent or not, also contribute to the identification of a common enemy, thereby bolstering identity formation processes.
- Memes can also be a 'soft-start' to recruitment: a joke that can subtly introduce a REMVE narrative without directly stating it.
- Common memes utilised by REMVE groups include Pepe the frog, doge dog and Wojak (Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2021):



Pepe symbolises “a kind of superior nonchalance toward others, helping to normalize hostile attitudes toward minorities and political opponents” as well as “a kind of anti-elite arrogance and condescension”.



The Doge Dog has been adapted in various ways to tease outdated humour and style of individuals and politicians. In far-right circles, it has often been combined with Nazi memorabilia to trivialise violence by the SS and Wehrmacht.



The original iteration of the Wojak meme expressed emotions such as melancholy, regret or loneliness. It has gradually been adapted and advanced by far-right meme culture to portray liberals expressing frustration over 'woke' issues- often opposite Pepe - and show that “normies” do not question the information that comes from mainstream press and politics.

# REMOVE Messaging in Mainstream Digital Culture

- These memes are part of a wider strategy of using humour and satire as a soft method for initial exposure.
  - Neo-Nazi groups in Sweden insert their propaganda in light-hearted entertainment to reach broader target populations online; their objective is to “catch people and slowly but steadily lead them” toward more-intense radicalisation via weaponisation of algorithms.
  - Analysis of far-right extremism on Twitter in Germany showed groups use rhetoric and imagery to formulate and twist certain frames or stories to present an impending threat to the white race.

## Video games

- In 2019, the EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator warned of the potential digital gaming environments hold in supporting various terrorist and extremist activities, including the radicalisation of young people. The Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) has classified gaming (adjacent) platforms as ‘hotbeds’ for radicalisation.
- The 2021 EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) details that both video games and gaming platforms are increasingly used to propagate extremist ideology and disseminate propaganda, especially by right-wing extremist actors. TE-SAT also warns that the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent increase in screentime contributed to a rise in opportunities for extremist actors to make contact with young people through gaming (adjacent) platforms (Shlegel, 2021).
  - a. **Discord** - Users can create public or private servers with forums, chat functions, audio and video communication, to connect with like-minded gamers. Many of the private servers are self-moderated. Discord has almost 7 million servers, over 300 million registered accounts, and over 140 million monthly active users globally. Users creating servers can add tags describing the main theme of the server. There are currently 3 634 servers with the tag ‘toxic’, 272 servers tagged as ‘right-wing’, 182 tagged with ‘hate’, 222 tagged as ‘Nazi’, 177 tagged as ‘homophobic’ and 194 tagged with ‘incel’ on Discord despite the deplatforming efforts. The Buffalo shooter was a frequent user of Discord, using it to spread his manifesto.
  - b. **Steam** - Largest digital distribution platform for PC games and had 120 million monthly active users in 2020. The 2016 Munich shooter engaged in Steam forums glorifying mass shootings and propagating anti-Muslim narratives. In 2019, an individual was arrested for posting threats against ‘high value’ Jewish targets and boasted “Wanna see a mass shooting with a body count of over 30 subhumans?” on Steam.

# REMVE Messaging in Mainstream Digital Culture

- a. **Twitch** - Livestreaming platform with 9.5 million active streamers. An average of 2 billion hours of streams is watched every month by users, of whom over 70 % are between the ages of 16 and 34.
- b. Originally developed to host gaming streams, there are now streams on a wide range of issues, including outdoor activities, (e-)sports, cooking, arts and craft, music, animals, political talkshows and podcasts.

## Tiktok

- Tiktok has had most notable instances of overt antisemitism (Rosenblatt, 2020, Tidy, 2020, ADL.org).
- In a sample of 1000+ videos, it was found that over 300 promoted REMVE messaging, including 26 denying the existence of the Holocaust, while footage of the Christchurch attack was "easily" discoverable.
- 279 videos analysed (27% of the full sample) contained music and 172 videos (17% of the full sample) used duet/stitch video creation features or video effects; demonstrating the adaptation of REMVEs to the platform.
- In the US the #Boogaloo hashtag gained over 2 million views. These do not necessarily translate to sympathy, but demonstrates increasing rates of exposure.
- One report also concluded REMVEs showed clear strategies for exploiting Tiktok's algorithms to ensure their content was promoted (O'Connor, 2021).

## Latching on to causes

- REMVEOs have proven adept at 'latching on' to popular online commentators and causes in order to push their own narratives.
- **Immigration** is the most popular of these and the easiest to act as a gateway to REMVE material. One report by RAND found that Gab, Reddit, and Telegram were platforms where xenophobic attitudes toward immigrants were difficult to disentangle from REMVE content (Williams et. al, 2020).
- REMVEOs have also utilised **mainstream media personalities** like Felix Kjellberg (a.k.a 'PewdiePie'), Joe Rogan and Tucker Carlson as popular forums to espouse their views and learn how to normalise or disguise their messaging.
  - In the case of the Christchurch terror attack, the gunman directly referenced Kjellberg while live streaming his attack.
  - Alex Paterson of Media Matters asserts that Rogan's podcast is "leads listeners further down right-wing rabbit holes," and that Rogan's "listeners are mostly young men... taking in completely unfounded conspiracy theories without any of the fact-checking."
  - Tucker Carlson has been referenced by REMVEOs as an example of how to frame messaging in a way to avoid censorship and persuade others.

# REMVEE Messaging in Mainstream Digital Culture

- According to posts uncovered by Marwick and Lewis (2021), many REMVEOs regard the **Israel-Palestine Conflict** as the ideal way to convey anti-semitism to left-wing audiences:

"It's the easiest fracture point for the left as most support Palestine and yet subconsciously support the Israelis for being a minority. This conflict in their mind will prime them to receive harsher truths that they can then consolidate. Also, if they see one of their jewish Data & Society Research Institute datasociety.net 35 friends/acquaintances speak ill of Palestinians they will subconsciously associate jews with their stereotypes."

## Fashion/Online stores

- An investigation by Bellingcat has found that a number of far-right and neo-Nazi online stores are openly utilising the infrastructure provided by major payment processors, commercial content management systems and web domain registrars.
- The report cited several Instagram pages that managed to stay within the platform's rules to avoid removal, but contained links to Telegram channels and web stores where the same groups were promoting and selling fashion items that depict Nazi and racist symbols.

## Vikings

- Nordic symbols and mythology have always been a core part of western REMVEO's 'brands.'
- It is reflective of a wider distortion of 'Viking' history by western REMVEOs; who use the Scandinavian cultures of 793-1066 (the 'Viking Age') as examples of 'nordic' supremacy and an uncorrupted society.
- These narratives overlook the high degrees of cosmopolitan interaction these peoples had with other cultures, including Greek and Arabic, and even reports of gender fluency.
- Nevertheless, the REMVEO view of the Viking remains very much mainstream and unintentionally parroted in popular tv shows, allowing for aforementioned soft exposure and gateway recruitment.



# Causes: Classic and New

## REMVE can give a sense of worth

- Gives a sense of being a "heroic race warrior" (Spekhard et. al., 2022).
- No matter where one's life is in terms of employment, education or wealth, one can still feel automatically superior to other races.
- This is not limited to White REMVE; Hindu nationalism appeals to all castes, as even the lowest of the caste system can still consider themselves 'superior' to Muslims.

## Isolation and community

- Spekhard et. al.'s study indicated that the majority of those studied who joined RWE groups didn't do so out of a sense of hate or attraction to violence initially, but because they were isolated and in emotionally painful circumstances and looking for a sense of belonging.
- These feelings after leaving groups can lead to ideological relapse.
- Given the isolation and echo chambers that characterise RMEVE, groups, disengaging from them often means losing one's entire group of friends, once again leading to feelings of isolation.

## Covid-19

- Covid restrictions amplified feelings of isolation and the amount of time spent online. It also led to increased introspection and dissatisfaction with the political landscape and, in some cases, careers and general life direction.
- At the same time, the economic impacts of Covid created a climate of distress that has historically benefited extremism in general.
- The added nature of the disease as having originated in China and causing travel shutdowns has benefited REMVEOs in furthering their narratives by linking travel and disease to immigration and the traditional narrative of immigrants and those of different races being vectors of disease and agents of moral decay.
  - In North America, the primary targets of this messaging have been Asians. Usually by focusing on debate regarding whether Covid originated in a biolab and growing Sino-Western tensions to assert that Covid is a Chinese plot to expand their influence, using immigrants as a tool.
  - In the UK and Europe, there has been a notable uptick of narratives suggesting Mosques are "superspreaders" that are exacerbating the pandemic, hijacking the concern regarding places of worship in general as potential centers of outbreaks.
  - In both areas, Jews feature as facilitators or direct spreaders of the pandemic.
- The linking of Covid to immigration also acts as a gateway to the Great Replacement disinformation narrative.

# Trajectory

## Increased globalisation and umbrella messaging

- The increased connectivity of the online world will lead to increased connectivity among REMVE communities.
- This will expose differing groups of differing ideologies to each other, which could lead to a broader form of messaging that focuses on unnamed 'elites.' Although this is not to say diverse groups will vanish or fully embrace each other.
- It could also lead to harmonisation among some anti-Islamic groups with Hindu Nationalist sentiments.

## Ukraine

- The Ukraine War has attracted REMVEOs who falsely idealise both Russia and Ukraine as ethnically homogenous states despite the mix of ethnicities within Ukraine and Russia. This does demonstrate a split/conflict in western REMVE narratives; but also provides narratives that appeal to both sides of the conflict.
- A recent research report by King's College London concluded Far Right Groups were using the Ukraine report to push anti-western narratives. Mainly focusing on Russia as a bastion of 'traditional values.'
- REMVEOs also support Ukraine (although not as many as support Russia).
- The Ukraine War is likely to be a long-term conflict. Creating ample opportunity for REMVEOs to adapt their messaging, potential examples could include:
  - Calling for peace between the two sides who have been manipulated into war by 'elites' and 'war profiteers' (a trojan horse for anti-Semitic disinformation)
  - Questioning prioritising a 'slavic' conflict over domestic issues.
  - Foment anger at the EU, China and India for their alleged parts in prolonging the conflict via continued purchase of energy from Russia.
- These narratives could likewise be adopted by right-wing politicians and pundits who could intentionally or unintentionally lend legitimacy to these viewpoints.

## Climate

- Much has been written on how climate change is acting as a catalyst in conflict zones and areas at risk of conflict over resources around the world.
- These conditions will create increased migrations (both economic and as refugees), brining immigration to the forefront of public discourse.
- Much like the Syrian Refugee crisis, this will lead to increased prevalence of REMVE messaging.
- Alongside the traditional immigration style narratives, 'ecofascism' (a disinformation narrative blaming environmental problems on overpopulation and resolving it through the elimination of certain 'undesirables') will also begin to gain increased exposure and traction.

# A dearth in expertise

## VEOs

- In 2019, former FBI agent and head of the Soufan Centre Ali Soufan, who tracked Al Qaeda prior to and immediately after the 9/11 attacks, remarked to a US House of Representatives (2019) that the situation with REMVE facing US law enforcement 'bears a striking resemblance to what we saw with jihadism'. Specifically he highlighted the lack of expertise and understanding of the movements and their global links:  
"I cannot say what form the supremacist equivalent of 9/11 might take, but we should not wait to find out before we act".
- A report carried out after the Christchurch attack revealed the failure of the country's security forces to track the right-wing extremist threat.
- In June 2022, Jonathan Hall QC expressed that the UK was 'still failing to adapt to the threat of lone actor extremists,' the majority of which have been REMVEs.
- Expertise has been growing in parallel with public concern, but it remains too low to successfully understand the threat, how it is adapting and its messaging strategy.
- REMVEOs have increasingly advocated a "leaderless resistance" strategy: focusing on lone-actor attacks connected and inspired by shared information:
  - All five attacks in Oslo, Charleston, Christchurch, El Paso and Buffalo saw the attackers acting alone, but publishing similar manifestos (occasionally the passages were directly lifted from previous attacks).
  - In this context, messaging plays an even more critical role.
- An internationally accessible group and messaging database with an output of factsheets is urgently required to increase general understanding and encourage expertise.

## CVE

- One study by Speckhard, Ellenberg and Garret (2022) indicated that former white supremacists who turned to psychotherapy for help exiting and rehabilitating from REMVEOs found their therapists "afraid of them" and "lacking relevant knowledge".
- One reason for the extreme-right's hugely successful and varied use of Internet memes is their knowledge of different Internet ecological niches and communities; something that is still lacking among CVE strategies.
- Looking at the process of self-radicalisation exhibited in recent attacks, it would appear that the process for rightwing radicalisation is similar, if shortened and less formal, to Horgan's theory of how child terrorists are socialised in six stages: seduction; schooling; selection; subjugation; specialisation; and stationing.
- CVE strategies for Jihadist groups have focused on utilising the Islamic theological hierarchy in order to counter Jihadist narratives. However, these hierarchies are largely absent from western REMVEOs. Instead, a preemptive campaign to disrupt gateway REMVE messaging is needed (Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 2020).

# PCVE Recommendations

## Disrupt messaging capabilities of REMVEOs

- Disruption of REMVE messaging has (allegedly) fallen to various security forces and law enforcement across the West by shutting down narrative channels and prosecuting those proven to engage in or planning violent action. But, as has been shown in this report, REMVE messaging has taken on more ambiguous forms in the mainstream, placing authorities in a difficult position.
- One of the greatest concerns in the West is the line between countering gateway REMVE messaging and restricting freedom of speech, particularly as it bolsters REMVE narratives of but simply shutting down outlets disseminating REMVE narratives does not have to be the only solution.
- Albany has piloted successful PCVE campaigns countering Islamic VEOs that have focused on building resilience by increasing awareness of VEO manipulation tactics through credible local leaders and local media mediums. As already mentioned, 'leaders' are different in the REMVE community, but former members can make for powerful deliverers of narrative, while getting inside the bubble (videogame streaming, Tiktok etc) is critical to preventing isolation.

## Understand group and individual psychological drivers

- While there can be commonalities between REMVEs (as covered in this report), PCVE strategies must avoid generalisations that will lead to catch all narratives that can be counter productive.
- Instead, tailored campaigns designed to appeal to different 'sections' of REMVEOs based on extensive profiling from active and former REMVEs across multiple cultures as well as consistent analysis of the structures of their messaging (which could indicate information processing levels that can be utilised for counter messaging).

## Establish credible alternative narratives

- REMVE attempts to latch on to popular online causes should be publicised and countered via pre-bunking of their messaging.
- These narratives must be delivered by aforementioned credible messengers and through popular REMVE mediums.

# PCVE Recommendations

## Share expertise

- Information-sharing is critical to building international resilience. Structures should be put in place facilitate the sharing of expertise, research and successful narratives.
- Regional Centers of Excellence, tied to an international Centre of Excellence could provide a framework to achieve these goals.
- To achieve this will require partnerships between government, academia and tech at a national and local level.

# Supplementary Reports

CTC Sentinel (2021). "The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism: An Investigative Report".

Geneva Centre for Security Policy (2020). White Crusade: How to Prevent Right-Wing Extremists from Exploiting the Internet

Marwick and Lewis (2021). Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online.

O'Connor (2021). Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok

Radicalisation Awareness Network (2021). It's not funny anymore. Far-right extremists' use of humour.

Speckhard, Ellenberg, Garret (2022). "White Supremacists Speak: Recruitment, Radicalization & Experiences of Engaging and Disengaging from Hate Groups."

Schlegel (2021). "Extremists' use of gaming (adjacent) platforms Insights regarding primary and secondary prevention measures"

US House of Representatives COMMITTEE ON HOMELAND SECURITY (2019). GLOBAL TERRORISM: THREATS TO THE HOMELAND

Williams et. al. (2022). Mapping White Identity Terrorism and Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremism: A Social Network Analysis of Online Activity