

## DETECTING EXTREMISTS ONLINE: EXAMINING ONLINE POSTING BEHAVIORS OF VIOLENT AND NON-VIOLENT RIGHT-WING EXTREMISTS

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### RACIALLY AND ETHNICALLY MOTIVATED VIOLENT EXTREMISM

*“There are several differences in the posting behaviors of violent and non-violent right-wing extremists which may inform future risk factor frameworks used to identify credible threats online.”*

### FAST FACTS

- Many unanswered questions remain about the characteristics of violent and non-violent extremists who are active online.
- Much more attention—both from researchers and practitioners—is needed to develop ways of detecting and assessing the online behaviors of violent extremists.
- In progressing our understanding of the online behaviors of violent and non-violent extremists, formers with insights into, the online dynamics of violent extremism will play a key role in future efforts.

### Context

Like most of us, violent extremists often leave a digital footprint behind. Notable examples include Anders Breivik, the Norwegian far-right terrorist convicted of killing 77 people in 2011, who was a registered member of a white supremacy web-forum and had ties to a far-right wing social media site;<sup>1</sup> Dylann Roof, the 21-year-old who murdered nine Black parishioners in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015, allegedly posted messages on a right-wing extremist (RWE) website<sup>2</sup> as well as hosted a website containing his alleged

1 Jamie Bartlett and Mark Littler, *Inside the EDL: Populist Politics in the Digital Era* (London: Demos, 2011).

2 Southern Poverty Law Center, “Dylann Roof May Have Been a Regular Commenter at Neo-Nazi Website The Daily Stormer,” June 22, 2015, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2015/06/21/dylann-roof-may-have-been-regular-commenter-neo-nazi-website-daily-stormer>.

manifesto;<sup>3</sup> and 28-year-old Australian Brenton Tarrant who, before killing 50 people in two Christchurch, New Zealand mosques in 2019 and live-streaming his attack, announced his intentions on 8chan and produced a “manifesto” linked on the website.<sup>4</sup>

In these cases, many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers raise questions about whether such violent individuals can be identified online *prior to* their attacks offline based on their online posting behaviors.<sup>5</sup> Despite these ongoing concerns, few empirically grounded analyses have identified which online users have engaged in violent extremism offline and then assessed their digital footprints, and fewer analyses have identified differences in posting behaviors of those who share extreme ideological beliefs but are violent or non-violent in the offline world. In fact, current research in terrorism and extremism studies does not fully capture nuanced differences between violent and non-violent extremists in general,<sup>6</sup> despite claims from experts about the importance of making such comparisons.<sup>7</sup>

This policy note draws from the results of our recent study<sup>8</sup> on the posting behavioral patterns of violent and non-violent right-wing extremists (RWEs) within a sub-forum of one of the largest and well-known online spaces of the extreme right, Stormfront. Our unique sample of 49 violent and

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3 Southern Poverty Law Center, “Charleston Shooter’s Alleged Manifesto Reveals HateGroup Helped to Radicalize Him Online,” June 20, 2015, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2015/06/19/charleston-shooters-alleged-manifesto-reveals-hate-group-helped-radicalize-him-online>.

4 Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan Macnair, *Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2019), 1-24, <https://icct.nl/publication/right-wing-extremists-persistent-online-presence-history-and-contemporary-trends/>.

5 Joel Brynielsson, Andreas Horndahl, Fredrik Johansson, Lisa Kaati, Christian Mårtenson, and Pontus Svenson, “Analysis of Weak Signals for Detecting Lone Wolf Terrorists,” *Security Informatics* 2, no. 11 (2013): 1-15, <https://doi.org/10.1186/2190-8532-2-11>; Katie Cohen, Fredrik Johansson, Lisa Kaati, and Jonas C. Mork, “Detecting Linguistic Markers for Radical Violence in Social Media,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 1 (2014): 246-256, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.849948>; Lisa Kaati, Amendra Shrestha, and Katie Cohen, “Linguistic Analysis of Lone Offender Manifestos,” *Proceedings of the 2016 IEEE International Conference on Cybercrime and Computer Forensics, Vancouver, BC, Canada*, [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Amendra-Shrestha/publication/308785134\\_Identifying\\_Warning\\_Behaviors\\_of\\_Violent\\_Lone\\_Offenders\\_in\\_Written\\_Communication/links/5b1aa99845851587f29d20b9/Identifying-Warning-Behaviors-of-Violent-Lone-Offenders-in-Written-Communication.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Amendra-Shrestha/publication/308785134_Identifying_Warning_Behaviors_of_Violent_Lone_Offenders_in_Written_Communication/links/5b1aa99845851587f29d20b9/Identifying-Warning-Behaviors-of-Violent-Lone-Offenders-in-Written-Communication.pdf).

6 Kiran M. Sarma, “Risk Assessment and the Prevention of Radicalization from Nonviolence Into Terrorism,” *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 278-288, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000121>; Allison G. Smith, *Risk Factors and Indicators Associated with Radicalization to Terrorism in the United States: What Research Supported by the National Institute of Justice Tells Us* (Washington DC: National Institute of Justice, 2018); Allison G. Smith, *How Radicalization to Terrorism Occurs in the United States: What Research Sponsored by the National Institute of Justice Tells Us* (Washington DC: National Institute of Justice, 2018).

7 Victor Asal, Steven M. Chermak, Sarah Fitzgerald, and Joshua D. Freilich, “Organizational-Level Characteristics in Right-Wing Extremist Groups in the United States Over Time,” *Criminal Justice Review* 45, no. 2 (2016): 250-266, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734016815626970>; Steven Chermak, Joshua Freilich, and Michael Suttmoeller, “The Organizational Dynamics of Far-Right Hate Groups in the United States: Comparing Violent to Nonviolent Organizations,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 3 (2013): 193-218, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2013.755912>; Gary LaFree, Michael A. Jensen, Patrick A. James, and Aaron Safer-Lichtenstein, “Correlates of Violent Political Extremism in the United States,” *Criminology* 56, no. 2 (2018): 233-268, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9125.12169>.

8 See: Ryan Scrivens, Thomas W. Wojciechowski, Joshua D. Freilich, Steven M. Chermak, and Richard Frank, “Comparing the Online Posting Behaviors of Violent and Non-Violent Right-Wing Extremists,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (March 8, 2021): 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1891893>.

50 non-violent RWEs<sup>9</sup> were identified by a former violent extremist<sup>10</sup> who reviewed a list of forum users and selected those who matched one of the two user types.<sup>11</sup> Here we plotted the average posting trajectory for users in the sample, followed by an assessment of the rates at which they stayed active or went dormant in the sub-forum during their measured posting careers.<sup>12</sup> We then used logistic regression to examine whether specific posting behaviors (i.e., total forum posts, total sub-forum posts, initiation month in the sub-forum, and dormancy status in the sub-forum) were characteristic of users' violence status.

This policy note highlights the importance of both identifying and examining the online behaviors of violent and non-violent extremists in preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) and provides researchers, practitioners, and policymakers with a number of recommendations for detecting and analyzing the online behaviors of violent and non-violent extremists in the future. However, we are cautious in comparing our sample of violent and non-violent RWEs for the purpose of generalizing their online patterns and behaviors, as both user groups are heterogenous<sup>13</sup> and the base rate of each is relatively small.<sup>14</sup>

## Relevance to policy and practice

### *Desisting posting behavior of violent and non-violent extremists*

Some empirical research highlights a steady increase in user participation in RWE online spaces<sup>15</sup> and conceptualizes digital platforms of the extreme right as those that polarize members' opinions

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9 Violent RWEs that were identified were those who committed several acts of known physical violence, including violent attacks against minorities and anti-racist groups. Conversely, non-violent RWEs identified were those who were actively involved in RWE movements and activities offline, including, but not limited to, rallies, marches, protests, poster and flyer campaigns, and group meetings and gatherings, but did not engage in physical violence in any known capacity.

10 By former violent extremists we refer to individuals who at one time in their lives subscribed to and/or perpetuated violence in the name of a particular extremist ideology and have since publicly and/or privately denounced violence in the name of a particular extremist ideology. In short, they no longer identify themselves as adherents of a particular extremist ideology or are affiliated with an extremist group or movement.

11 This identification process was done under the supervision of the lead researcher of this project. Each time the former identified a user of interest, they were asked to explain in as much detail possible why the user was identified as a violent or non-violent RWE. The former was also asked to provide examples of the activities that each user engaged in as well as their association with or connection to each identified user. This was done to verify the authenticity of each user identified by the former.

12 Individual posts were analyzed across a time period of 54 months for each user, beginning at the time of their first post in the sub-forum. A period of 54 months was chosen as the time span because it was the median number of months between users' first and last post in the sub-forum.

13 For a discussion on the scope and intensity of online activities for varied cohorts of violent and non-violent extremists, see: Michael Jensen, Patrick James, Gary LaFree, Aaron Safer-Lichtenstein, and Elizabeth Yates, "The Use of Social Media by United States Extremists," START, College Park, Maryland, 2018, <https://www.start.umd.edu/publication/use-social-media-united-states-extremists>.

14 For more on the implications of low base rates in terrorism and extremism studies, see: Marc Sageman, "The Implication of Terrorism's Extremely Low Base Rate," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 2 (2021): 302-311, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2021.1880226>.

15 Ryan Scrivens, Garth Davies, and Richard Frank, "Measuring the Evolution of Radical Right-Wing Posting Behaviors Online," *Deviant Behavior* 41, no. 2. (2020): 216-232, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2018.1556994>; Magdalena Wojcieszak, "'Don't Talk to Me': Effects of Ideological Homogenous Online Groups and Politically Dissimilar Offline Ties on Extremism," *New Media and Society* 12, no. 4 (2010): 637-655, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342775>.

over time.<sup>16</sup> Other empirical research suggests that the majority of those who post in RWE online spaces tend to desist in and tail off their posting behavior over time.<sup>17</sup> Our study results align with the latter: we found a general decline in posting behavior and a steady dropout in posting activity over time for the RWEs in our study. This is a noteworthy set of findings because it suggests that RWEs—whether violent or non-violent offline—generally do not increase in their posting behavior over time. Research similarly suggests that the online activity of the average user will decrease over time, whether it is on blogs,<sup>18</sup> social media sites,<sup>19</sup> or responses on popular news sites,<sup>20</sup> for example, largely due to decreasing interest.

Regardless, our findings may in part be a symptom of the study sample: each user was either a violent or non-violent RWE and was actively involved in right-wing extremism. It is reasonable to assume, then, that posting in an open access web-forum may have become a concern to the users over time, given the offline activities they were engaged in (e.g., violence, illegal activities, organizing rallies, recruiting, etc.). Empirical research on the online behaviors of RWEs similarly finds that those who are actively involved in RWE activities offline are oftentimes concerned that law enforcement officials, intelligence agencies, and anti-racists are monitoring their online activities and may modify their posting behaviors to avoid detection.<sup>21</sup> With this in mind, it may be the case that the RWEs in our study were concerned that, by posting content in an online space that can be publicly viewed, they were putting themselves in a vulnerable position and could become the subject of an investigation from anti-hate watch organizations or even law enforcement.

## *Low-profile posting behavior of violent extremists*

Interestingly, violent RWEs in our study posted more messages in the beginning of their posting careers than the non-violent RWE group but posted less than the non-violent group in the later portions of their posting careers. Violent RWEs also desisted in posting frequency at a much quicker rate than their non-violent counterparts and the only observed characteristic of violent

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16 Manuela Caiani and Patricia Kröll, “The Transnationalization of the Extreme Right and the use of the Internet,” *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 39, no 4. (2014): 331-351, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2014.973050>; Robert Futrell and Pete Simi, “Free Spaces, Collective Identity, and the Persistence of U.S. White Power Activism,” *Social Problems* 51, no 1. (2004): 16-42, <https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2004.51.1.16>.

17 Bennett Kleinberg, Isabelle van der Vegt, and Paul Gill, “The Temporal Evolution of a Far-Right Forum,” *Journal of Computational Social Science* 4, no. 1 (May 2020): 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42001-020-00064-x>; Ryan Scrivens, Thomas W. Wojciechowski, and Richard Frank, “Examining the Developmental Pathways of Online Posting Behavior in Violent Right-Wing Extremist Forums,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (October 26, 2020): 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1833862>.

18 Jin-Li Guo, C. Fan, and Z.-H. Guo, “Weblog Patterns and Human Dynamics with Decreasing Interest,” *The European Physical Journal B* 81, no. 3 (2011): 341-344, <https://doi.org/10.1140/epib/e2011-10722-1>.

19 Minas Gjoka, Michael Sirivianos, Athina Markopoulou, and Xiaowei Yang, “Poking Facebook: Characterization of OSN Applications,” *WOSN '08: Proceedings of the first workshop on Online social networks* (August 2008): 31-36, <https://doi.org/10.1145/1397735.1397743>.

20 Jaewon Yang and Jure Leskovec, “Patterns of Temporal Variation in Online Media,” *WOSN '08: Proceedings of the first workshop on Online social networks* (August 2008): 31–36, <https://doi.org/10.1145/1397735.1397743>.

21 Tiana Gaudette, Ryan Scrivens, and Vivek Venkatesh, “The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism: Insights from Former Right-Wing Extremists,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (July 16, 2020): 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2020.1784147>.

status was having less total number of posts. In other words, violent RWEs tended to be those who were more sporadic in their posting behavior but were much less active online than non-violent RWEs. Analysts who are searching for signs of violent extremists online, then, should perhaps be less concerned about investigating high-frequency posters and more concerned about those who post fewer messages online but are erratic in their posting behavior.

This set of findings is supported by empirical research that found that violent members of RWE movements are largely clandestine, often paranoid because of the violence they engage in, and are thus concerned about revealing their identities.<sup>22</sup> Similar to previous research that highlights how some violent RWEs alter their online behaviors to avoid detection from law enforcement,<sup>23</sup> the waning and inactive posting behavior of the violent RWEs in our sample may reflect this security concern. This finding comes as little surprise, given that similar tactics have been adopted by a new generation of RWEs who in recent years have exploited various encrypted online platforms and messaging apps to avoid being tracked and detected.<sup>24</sup>

## Recommendations

### *Identify key characteristics of violent and non-violent extremist posters online*

Many unanswered questions remain about the characteristics of violent and non-violent extremists who are active online. Unlike the growing body of research that has drawn distinctions between the offline activities and behaviors of violent and non-violent extremists,<sup>25</sup> research on the online behaviors of violent and non-violent extremists does not include information on key characteristics identified in this literature such as an individual's employment status, criminal records, history of mental illness, extremist/radicalized peers, and types of grievances, among many others.

Future work is therefore needed to assess whether these and other characteristics drive differential posting behavior for violent and non-violent extremists. It is also unclear if changes in posting behaviors are driving changes in violent offending or vice versa. Future work should therefore pinpoint exact moments in time that individuals engaged in violence offline—as well as the kinds of violence, motives, victims, etc.—and then assess their posting behaviors both before and after

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22 Jeff Gruenewald, Joshua D. Freilich, and Steven M. Chermak, "An Overview of the Domestic Far-Right and Its Criminal Activities," in *Hate Crime: Issues and Perspectives, Vol. 4 Offenders*, eds. Barbara Perry and Randy Blazak (New York, NY: Praeger, 2009), 1-22; Mark S. Hamm, *American Skinheads: The Criminology and Control of Hate Crime* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993); Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens, *Right-Wing Extremism in Canada* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019).

23 Gaudette et al., "The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism."

24 See: Conway et al., "Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence."

25 John Horgan, Neil Shortland, Suzzette Abbasciano, and Shaun Walsh, "Actions Speak Louder Than Words: A Behavioral Analysis of 183 Individuals Convicted for Terrorist Offenses in the United States from 1995 to 2012," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 61, no. 5 (2016): 1228-1237, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1556-4029.13115>; Katarzyna Jasko, Gary LaFree, and Arie Kruglanski, "Quest for Significance and Violent Extremism: The Case of Domestic Radicalization," *Political Psychology* 38, no. 5 (October 2017): 815-831, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12376>; Sarah Knight, David Keatley, and Katie Woodward, "Comparing the Different Behavioral Outcomes of Extremism: A Comparison of Violent and Non-Violent Extremists, Acting Alone or as Part of a Group," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (November 11, 2019): 1-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2019.1680192>; LaFree et al., "Correlates of Violent Political Extremism in the United States."

the act of violence. Doing so may shed light on whether specific posting behaviors in the online world escalate to violent actions in the offline world, which would certainly be of interest to law enforcement and intelligence communities interested in developing frameworks to address the threat of violent extremism as it evolves in the online milieu.

## *Develop innovative ways of pinpointing violent and non-violent extremists online*

Of the limited research that has managed to identify violent and/or non-violent extremists for the purpose of examining their online behaviors, the sample sizes are rather small.<sup>26</sup> For example, Holbrook and Taylor<sup>27</sup> examined the pre-arrest media usage of five case studies of UK-based terrorists, while Holt and colleagues<sup>28</sup> examined the underlying theoretical assumptions evident in radicalization models through a case-study analysis of the on- and offline behaviors of four violent extremists. Other samples—which too are relatively small—are limited to a group of violent and non-violent extremists who were identified by and known to one former extremist,<sup>29</sup> which biases the sample and restricts researchers’ ability to identify and analyze the posting behaviors of an array of violent and non-violent extremists found online.

While these limitations temper the findings and the implications of this body of work, they should spur future investigators to gather a more robust sample in order to provide a stronger understanding of the posting behaviors of violent and non-violent extremists in general and RWEs in particular. Fortunately, some researchers have responded to this call, including Freilich and colleagues<sup>30</sup> with their U.S. Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), an open-source database which includes information on non-violent and violent criminal behavior associated with RWE groups, including data on events, perpetrators, and victims. Gill and colleagues<sup>31</sup> also created a violent online political extremism database—derived from open-source intelligence—which includes details of the online behaviors of 223 convicted UK-based terrorists.

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26 Donald Holbrook and Max Taylor, “Terrorism as Process Narratives: A Study of Pre-Arrest Media Usage and the Emergence of Pathways to Engagement,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 6 (2019): 1307-1326, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2017.1341879>; Thomas J. Holt, Joshua D. Freilich, Steven M. Chermak, and Gary LaFree, “Examining the Utility of Social Control and Social Learning in the Radicalization of Violent and Nonviolent Extremists,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 11, no. 3 (2018): 125-148, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2018.1470661>; Scrivens et al., “Comparing the Online Posting Behaviors of Violent and Non-Violent Right-Wing Extremists”; Michael Wolfowicz, Simon Perry, Badi Hasisi, and David Weisburd, “Faces of Radicalism: Differentiating Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicals by Their Social Media Profiles,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 116 (March 2021): 106646, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106646>.

27 Holbrook and Taylor, “Terrorism as Process Narratives.”

28 Holt et al., “Examining the Utility of Social Control and Social Learning in the Radicalization of Violent and Nonviolent Extremists.”

29 Scrivens et al., “Comparing the Online Posting Behaviors of Violent and Non-Violent Right-Wing Extremists.”

30 Joshua D. Freilich, Steven M. Chermak, Roberta Belli, Jeff Gruenewald, and William S. Parkin, “Introducing the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB),” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 2 (April 2014): 26, 372-384, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.713229>.

31 Paul Gill, Emily Corner, Maura Conway, Amy Thornton, Mia Bloom, and John Horgan, “Terrorist Use of the Internet by the Numbers: Quantifying Behaviors, Patterns, and Processes,” *Criminology and Public Policy* 16, no. 1 (2017): 99-117, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-9133.12249>.

Nevertheless, this emerging research base is in its infancy and requires further exploration. Much more attention—both from researchers and practitioners—is needed to develop ways of detecting and, by extension, assessing the online behaviors of individuals who have engaged in violence offline. Whether this work involves measuring digital pathways of violent radicalization or detecting virtual indicators that may prevent future terrorist attacks, the urgent need to pinpoint violent extremists online is one of the most significant policy challenges faced by law enforcement agencies and security officials worldwide.<sup>32</sup>

## *Work with former extremists to generate knowledge on the online behaviors of violent and non-violent extremists*

It has become increasingly common for practitioners and policymakers in the Western world to draw from the insights of former extremists to generate knowledge on and respond to the prevalence and contours of violent extremism and terrorism.<sup>33</sup> While some researchers and practitioners have raised concerns about including formers in this space, ranging from discussions about their reliability and credibility to questions about whether their inclusion could raise concerns in the public sphere,<sup>34</sup> others have argued that formers can provide valuable insight into issues that terrorism and extremism scholars, among many others, are concerned with.<sup>35</sup> Recently, social media, tech companies, and think tanks in particular have been quick to turn to formers to assist in the development of online P/CVE initiatives, but scholars who are working in the field of violent online political extremism have been much slower to bring formers to the table.<sup>36</sup>

In progressing our understanding of the online behaviors of violent and non-violent extremists, formers who have experience with, and insight into, the online dynamics of violent extremist movements will play a critical role in future efforts. In particular, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers could interview them about their online behaviors when they were involved in violent extremism. Formers may also provide them with information about or identify online users who they know are violent and non-violent in the offline world. We caution stakeholders in this regard though. This type of collaboration requires formers who are willing to work with stakeholders as well as a level of trust between the two parties. At the onset of this endeavor, both parties should discuss their expectations from the collaboration, especially those that relate

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32 Ryan Scrivens and Garth Davies, “Identifying Radical Content Online,” *Policy Options*, January 31, 2018, <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/january-2018/identifying-radical-content-online/>.

33 Daniel Koehler, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism* (London, UK: Routledge, 2017); Ryan Scrivens, Vivek Venkatesh, Maxime Bérubé, and Tiana Gaudette, “Combating Violent Extremism: Voices of Former Right-Wing Extremists,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (November 11, 2019): 1-21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2019.1686856>; Marian Tapley and Gordon Clubb, *The Role of Formers in Countering Violent Extremism* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, 2019), <https://icct.nl/publication/the-role-of-formers-in-countering-violent-extremism/>.

34 Radicalization Awareness Network, *Dos and Don'ts of Involving Formers in PVE/CVE Work* (Bordeaux, France: RAN Center of Excellence, 2017), [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/ran-papers/docs/dos\\_and\\_donts\\_involving\\_formers\\_in\\_pve\\_cve\\_work\\_bordeaux\\_27\\_06\\_2017\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/default/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/dos_and_donts_involving_formers_in_pve_cve_work_bordeaux_27_06_2017_en.pdf).

35 Tore Bjørgo and John Horgan, eds. *Leaving Terrorism Behind: Individual and Collective Disengagement* (London, UK: Routledge, 2008); Kurt Braddock and John Horgan, “Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 5 (2016): 381-404, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2015.1116277>.

36 Gaudette et al., “The Role of the Internet in Facilitating Violent Extremism.”

to protecting the identity of the former(s). Certainly, formers, out of fear of repercussions by members of their former extremist group (or other groups), may not want to have a public profile, and stakeholders must therefore protect their identities if formers so choose.<sup>37</sup> Overcoming these obstacles, and many others not mentioned here,<sup>38</sup> will be essential for the development of these collaborations and, by extension, generating knowledge on the online posting behaviors of violent and non-violent extremists.

If researchers, practitioners, and policymakers do manage to collaborate with former extremists who can and will identify violent and non-violent extremists online, they must keep in mind that the validity of the collected data is based on one (or multiple) key informant. Thus, future work should verify the authenticity of each identified user by pinpointing their birth and given name. These names could then be triangulated with open-source intelligence (e.g., media reports, court documents, terrorism databases, and social media accounts on each user) or with the ECDB, which currently includes over 500 data points on nearly 1,000 violent and 1,500 non-violent RWEs.<sup>39</sup> Triangulating these data may further inform law enforcement and intelligence communities on the online discussions that may result in offline extremist violence as well as shed light on the nexus between the on- and offline worlds of violent and non-violent extremists, both of which are ongoing policy challenges for practitioners and policymakers.

## Conclusion

Despite the ongoing need for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to identify and assess the online activities of violent RWEs prior to their engagement in violence offline, little is empirically known about their online behaviors generally or differences in their posting behaviors compared to non-violent extremists who share similar ideological beliefs. What the limited research does suggest, however, is that there are several noteworthy differences in the posting behaviors of violent and non-violent RWEs, many of which may inform future risk factor frameworks used by law enforcement and intelligence agencies to identify credible threats online. This policy note provides a brief summary of the key findings from this small but growing body of research as well as provides several recommendations for advancing our understanding of the online behaviors of violent and non-violent RWEs. Overall, much more work is needed to identify and assess the online behaviors of violent and non-violent extremists, as doing so may offer law enforcement and intelligence communities with valuable, evidence-based intelligence that will place them in a better position to be on high alert only when necessary.

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37 Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism: What Works and What are the Implications for Government* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2013), <https://www.dmeformpeace.org/peacechange/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Review-of-Programs-to-Counter-Narratives-of-Violent-Extremism.pdf>.

38 For more information on the challenges of working with formers, see: Radicalization Awareness Network, *Dos and Don'ts of Involving Formers in PVE/CVE Work*.

39 For more information on the ECDB, see: Joshua D. Freilich, Steven M. Chermak, Jeff Gruenewald, William S. Parkin, and Brent R. Klein, "Patterns of Fatal Extreme-Right Crime in the United States," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 6 (2018): 38-51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26544642>.



# Suggested further reading

## On the role of the internet in facilitating violent extremism and terrorism

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