

RESEARCH NOTE

Understanding the Online Posting Behaviours of Violent and Non-Violent Right-Wing Extremists: A Research Note

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Abstract: Despite the ongoing need for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to identify and assess the online activities of violent extremists prior to their engagement in violence offline, little is known empirically about their posting behaviours generally or differences in their online behaviours compared to non-violent extremists who share similar ideological beliefs. In the past five plus years, Scrivens and colleagues developed a dataset of posting behaviours of violent and non-violent right-wing extremists (RWEs) found on Stormfront, the oldest, largest, and one of the most influential RWE forums. This work has been presented before key stakeholders around the world and has resulted in various peer-reviewed publications with studies ranging from examining developmental posting behaviours to examining posting behaviours during peak posting days. This Research Note examines policy and investigatory implications, methodological challenges, and avenues for future research on the online posting behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs.

Keywords: right-wing extremism, posting behaviours, violent right-wing extremists, non-violent right-wing extremists, Internet

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Background

In recent years, many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have paid closer attention to the presence of violent extremists and terrorists online – and in large part to better understand the different ways that individuals engage online spaces, the interplay between the Internet and violent extremism, and the interactions between the online and offline worlds of violent extremists.¹ Here, a growing emphasis has been on the digital patterns and behaviours of violent right-wing extremists (RWEs) and terrorists for several reasons.² First, online platforms are proven to be major facilitators of recruitment, radicalisation, and mobilisation to support and commit violence. Second, these spaces play a crucial role in individual recruitment, as organisations and movements use them to encourage others to engage in such acts. Third, the connections between online activities and offline harm are troubling.³ Key examples include Anders Breivik, who murdered 77 individuals in a van bombing and mass shooting in Norway in 2011. He was a registered member of a white supremacy forum and had ties to far-right social media sites. Brenton Tarrant, who before killing 51 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.⁴ Similarly, 18-year-old Payton Gendron posted details of his plan to attack the Tops Friendly Markets store in Buffalo, NY, in a private Discord chat room prior to killing 10 people and live-streaming parts of his attack on Twitch in 2022. Gendron allegedly wrote and posted a 180-page manifesto on 4chan.⁵ Most recently, in 2024, Justin Mohn murdered and beheaded his father in Pennsylvania and then uploaded a video online of the severed head while espousing far-right conspiracy theories.⁶ In each of these cases, many researchers, practitioners, and policymakers have raised serious questions about whether such individuals can be identified online before their engagement in violence offline.⁷

Understandably, increased attention has been paid to identifying violent RWEs online prior to their offline acts of violence and then scrutinising their online presence. Researchers, practitioners, and policymakers also continue to question how an offender’s consumption of and networking around violent extremist online content may influence their acceptance of extremist ideology and/or their decision to engage in violent extremism and terrorism offline.⁸ Despite these ongoing efforts, few empirical analyses have identified which online users have engaged in violent extremism offline and then assessed their online posting behaviours. Fewer analyses have identified differences in online posting behaviours of those who espouse extreme beliefs in these spaces and whether they are involved in legal behaviours (e.g., protesting and distributing extremist literature) or illegal activities (e.g., committing violent or non-violent crimes) offline.⁹ Most studies, similar to research on the causes of violent extremism and terrorism in general, lack comparison groups despite an urgent need to focus on comparative analyses, nor do they consider how violent extremists differ from non-violent extremists.¹⁰

A growing amount of research on the online behaviours of violent and non-violent extremists has emerged in recent years. Holt and colleagues,¹¹ for example, examined the underlying theoretical assumptions evident in radicalisation models through a case-study analysis of violent and non-violent extremists. Wolfowicz and colleagues¹² used a matched case-control design to differentiate between terrorists and non-violent radicals based on their social media profiles. Allchorn and colleagues¹³ examined the role of violent conspiratorial narratives in violent and non-violent RWE manifestos online. Brown and colleagues¹⁴ drew from machine learning to examine online signals of extremist mobilisation by comparing online communications of those who mobilised to RWE action with those who held similar views but did not mobilise.

We have also contributed to the expansion of this body of knowledge in online terrorism and extremism research by developing a dataset on the posting behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs.¹⁵ Derived from this larger research project have been several peer-reviewed

publications, including an examination of the posting behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs and whether specific posting behaviours can be indicative of a user's propensity for violence.¹⁶ In a paper by Davies and colleagues, we also examined how violent and non-violent RWE identities take shape over time online.¹⁷ Violent and non-violent RWEs' time of entry into the lifespan of an extremist online community and posting activity as a predictor for violence was also assessed in Scrivens and colleagues¹⁸ and Wojciechowski and colleagues.¹⁹ In addition, the existence of extremist ideologies, personal grievances, and violent extremist mobilisation efforts expressed by violent and non-violent RWEs (as well as a sample of postings within an extremist online community) was quantified in Scrivens.²⁰ Posting behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs during peak and non-peak posting days online were also examined in Scrivens,²¹ as well as their persisting and desisting posting behaviours over time.²² Lastly, we developed and compared posting typologies among a sample of violent and non-violent RWEs in Scrivens and colleagues.²³ These experiences have provided us with unique insights regarding policy and investigatory implications, methodological challenges, and avenues for future research on the online posting behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs. These issues are discussed below.

Implications

Ideologues, Low Profilers, and Modifiers

Several posting characteristics and profiles have been identified in the empirical research on online posting patterns and behaviours of violent and non-violent RWE, all of which have important policy and investigatory implications. For example, across the studies on online behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs, it is clear that violent users tend to be much less active online than non-violent users²⁴ or individuals who post in the same online platform generally.²⁵ Research also finds that non-violent RWEs, not violent RWEs, display more potentially threatening online behaviours that law enforcement and intelligence agencies may deem worthy of further investigation – especially from a credible threat perspective.²⁶ Not only do they post much more frequently than violent users, but the content they do post contains noticeably more indicators of extremism – i.e., ideological content and efforts to mobilise to extremist violence.²⁷ In other words, non-violent RWEs tend to be the users posting the most ideological posts, especially those targeting their adversary groups, as well as posts containing efforts to mobilise others to extremist violence. Research suggests that online behaviours of non-violent RWEs tend to reflect one of an 'ideologue', wherein they likely perceive their role in and engage with the RWE movement as ideologues by providing "conceptual tools" that can be taken up by violent users. This has also been substantiated by empirical research.²⁸

In addition, research suggests that violent RWEs are generally clandestine, often paranoid because of their violence and are concerned about revealing their identities.²⁹ They also alter their online behaviours to avoid detection.³⁰ The online behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs point to how violent users modify their online presence, as reflected in their generally low profiles online.³¹ Research involving in-depth interviews with former violent RWEs on their Internet usage during their involvement in violent extremism suggests that violent extremists are concerned about their online and offline security, noting that they modify their behaviours to avoid detection and infiltration from law enforcement and anti-fascist groups.³² Similar tactics have been adopted by a newer generation of RWEs, who have exploited various encrypted online platforms and messaging apps to avoid being tracked and detected.³³

Together, analysts searching for signs of violent extremists online should be less concerned about investigating high-frequency posters and more concerned about investigating low-

profile, low-frequency posters, as those who post fewer messages – whether it be messages in general or those containing key indicators of violent extremism – may in fact be the violent users. However, as Brown and colleagues³⁴ correctly point out in their examination of online behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs, expressing extremist views alone does not signal mobilisation towards offline action.

Desisters and Persisters

Research on the online desisting and persisting behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs,³⁵ although in its infancy, suggests RWEs tend to decline or desist in online posting behaviour over time, with approximately half dropping out in posting frequency on average.³⁶ Importantly, this suggests that RWEs – whether violent or non-violent offline – generally do not increase in their posting behaviour over time. This contrasts with empirical research that found a steady increase in user participation in RWE online spaces,³⁷ as well as research conceptualising digital platforms of the extreme right as “hornets’ nests” or “lone wolf incubators” that polarise users’ opinions over time.³⁸ Yet findings from the research on online posting behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs align with recent empirical research suggesting that a majority of those who post in RWE online spaces, whether in collective extremist forums for a general audience, such as Stormfront³⁹ or violent RWE forums,⁴⁰ tend to desist in (and tail off) their posting behaviour over time. They may also become active in other parts of the RWE online extremist ecosystem, by migrating their extremist views from one space to another.⁴¹ At this stage in the project, the extent to which users desist in posting behaviour or migrate to other platforms is unclear.

On the other hand, other recent work in this space identified and developed various posting sub-groups based on users’ online patterns: (1) non-violent persisters, (2) non-violent desisters, (3) violent persisters, and (4) violent desisters.⁴² Here, researchers found that violent and non-violent RWEs tended to decrease their posting behaviour on average, but they also uncovered noticeable sub-groups of violent and non-violent persisters. In short, these sub-groups persisted in their online posting behaviours (i.e., total posts, total ideological posts, and total violent mobilisation posts) over time on average. It could be, for instance, that these users were embedded in RWE groups offline and, in turn, had a greater stake in participating in online discussions for recruitment and radicalisation purposes. Regardless, this is a notable posting pattern and sub-group that law enforcement and intelligence agencies should be aware of as they sift through myriad online discussions to identify potential credible threats.

Research also finds that non-violent RWEs are more likely to persist in their online behaviour than violent RWEs – in short, they tend to be active online longer. Importantly, they are also among the highest in posting ideological content as well as mobilisation content over time. In other words, these prolific posters are outspoken about their extremist beliefs and make numerous efforts to mobilise others to extremism.⁴³ Perhaps they are unafraid to do so because they refrain from engaging in violence offline and instead perceive their role in (and engage with) the RWE movement as ideologues. Regardless, from a pragmatic perspective, pinpointing individuals who adopt these active roles in the RWE movement, and examining the ideological content they attempt to promote to the masses, may be helpful for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to gauge the extremist ideologies driving individuals to extremist violence.

Unassuming Opportunists

Uncovered in the empirical research on the online posting behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs was a prominent sub-group of violent desisters who were low-profilers who posted few messages in general and ideological posts in particular. But what was particularly striking about

this sub-group was that much of the content they did post when desisting from the online space encouraged others to mobilise to extremist violence. This sub-group also showed increased overall online activity, particularly in posting mobilisation content, immediately before they desisted from the online space.⁴⁴ Perhaps they were making a last-ditch effort to mobilise to extremist violence as they desisted from posting, or perhaps they played key offline roles in the RWE movement (e.g., engaging in violence to show their level of commitment to the cause) and in turn did not see the utility in posting other than encouraging others to mobilise to violence. This, indeed, is a notable posting group that law enforcement and key stakeholders in general ought to be aware of.

Research examining the online posting behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs during peak and non-peak posting days likewise found that violent users were opportunists, based on an analysis of their online posting patterns. Striking was the extent to which the violent RWEs (but not the non-violent RWEs) posted violent mobilisation messages during peak days.⁴⁵ That is, unlike non-violent RWEs, the violent group posted a noticeably larger proportion of violent mobilisation posts on peak days than they did on non-peak days.⁴⁶ Perhaps the violent group, which was generally the least active in the studies,⁴⁷ saw peak posting days as opportune times to take advantage of the high online traffic to mobilise others to extremist violence. Such a finding was a surprise, as previous work has found that violent RWEs tend to post mobilisation messages at a much lower rate than their non-violent counterparts.⁴⁸ Yet other recent work suggests that the presumed positive association between posting frequency and risk of extremist violence may not be so straightforward.⁴⁹ Scrivens and colleagues,⁵⁰ for example, examined how RWE users' initial time of activity/entry into the lifespan of an extremist online space influenced posting behaviour and found that non-violent users who were first active early in the lifespan of the online space tended to post more, while non-violent users who first became active later in the space posted less. On the other hand, violent RWEs who first became active early in the lifespan of the space tended to post less, compared with violent users who became active later in the space and posted more. Indeed, these nuances have policy relevance that should be investigated in future research.⁵¹

Future Directions

Although these studies have provided unique insight into the differences in posting behaviours between violent and non-violent RWEs online, this research is not without its shortcomings. But these shortcomings may be used to drive forward the study on online posting behaviours of violent and non-violent extremists in general.

The first relates to samples. In general, sample sizes are relatively small in this research space. Scrivens and colleagues,⁵² for example, examined online posting behaviours based on a sample of 99 violent and non-violent users; Brown and colleagues⁵³ examined online communications of just 26 users; and Allchorn and colleagues⁵⁴ examined a mere 9 manifestos. Future research should therefore gather a more robust sample, which may include more recent sample groups and a variety of online platforms to replicate prior studies, all in an effort to provide a stronger understanding of the online posting behaviours of violent and non-violent extremists in general. Further, analyses of the online behaviours of violent and non-violent RWEs are generally limited to a sample of postings from one online space (e.g., Stormfront mostly, and to a lesser extent Iron March, Discord, and Gab). Future research should compare posting behaviours across platform types, such as a comparison of violent RWE forums with generic (non-violent) RWE forums, or a comparison with mainstream social media sites, fringe platforms, and digital applications. Such analyses would: (1) provide practitioners and policymakers with much needed insight into the extent to which posting behaviours are unique to specific sample groups (i.e., violent and non-violent), and (2) shed light on whether such behaviours span across online spaces

that facilitate extremism generally, or whether certain platforms have unique functions for facilitating extremism – especially violent extremists. Such analyses would also be useful in examining whether online desistance from a particular online space is more akin to dormancy or displacement.

The second limitation relates to data. In short, there remain many unanswered questions about the characteristics of violent and non-violent RWEs in the research. Data examining the online posting patterns of violent and non-violent RWEs does not include information on key characteristics identified in the literature on offline activities and behaviours of violent and non-violent extremists, such as employment status, criminal records, history of mental illness, networks of radicalised peers, and types of grievances, among others.⁵⁵ Future research is therefore needed to assess whether these characteristics (and others) mirror violent or non-violent RWEs in the research space, as well as whether certain characteristics drive differential posting patterns. But perhaps most importantly, future research should pinpoint exact moments in time that individuals engaged in violence offline (and the kinds of violence, motives, victims, etc.) and then assess their posting patterns both before and after the act of violence. Doing so may shed light on whether specific posting patterns online escalate to violent actions offline.

Having said that, right-wing extremism is evolving online. A newer generation has moved from once popular websites and forums to social media, to lesser-known platforms (e.g., Gab, Chan boards, and Discord), encrypted channels (e.g., Telegram and Signal), and gaming platforms (e.g., Steam and Twitch).⁵⁶ But little is empirically known about the content, behaviours, and networks making up these largely unmoderated spaces.⁵⁷ Even less is known about violent users occupying them.⁵⁸ Likewise, the current hot button topics in terrorism and extremism research are (1) youth and the emerging terrorism threat landscape, and (2) young adults and nihilistic violent extremism.⁵⁹ But very little is empirically known about the two, especially about the online presence of individuals who are fixated on violence.⁶⁰ It goes without saying, then, that researchers ought to build and adapt their projects in the online behaviours space that are practitioner-focused and problem-oriented to prevent violent extremism – and all to cut through the noise online to identify credible threats. Particularly useful in this regard would be primary data collection efforts via in-depth interviews or surveys with current and/or former violent and non-violent extremists affiliated with more recent extremist movements than those previously examined in this research space. Questions may range from general inquiries about their Internet usage to more pointed questions about their online posting patterns and behaviours. Backtracking through their online histories and offline engagement may also reveal valuable insight for key stakeholders in combating violent extremism.

Lastly, the complexity of detecting and then examining violent extremists online requires interdisciplinary research, bridging computing and social sciences, for example. Computing scientists can overcome data collection challenges (i.e., large-scale collection, formatting, and archiving) while social scientists can develop theoretically informed, empirically driven research questions that have policy implications to combat violent extremism.⁶¹ In addition, identifying and studying violent extremists online requires a multi-sectoral response. Indeed, the foundations of violent extremism are complex and multifaceted, grounded in both individual and social conditions.⁶² Identifying and responding to violent extremism should therefore also be multidimensional, building on strengths and expertise of diverse sections, including law enforcement, education, social services, public health, youth workers, victim service providers, etc.). Multidimensional responses should also be rooted in a public health model – i.e., a non-securitised and ideology-agnostic approach, minimising risk factors by increasing protective factors to prevent extremist violence.⁶³ While this is arguably the most comprehensive approach to preventing targeted violence (and by extension, violent extremism),⁶⁴ an ongoing challenge

for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers will continue to be the need to identify credible threats online before violence happens offline. One approach that key stakeholders may draw from in identifying signs of violent extremists online is from the work of Lantern, a coalition of tech companies that aim to protect children through signal sharing. In short, signals (i.e., information to identify online child sexual exploitation and abuse) are shared with tech companies to uncover active threats to children, from content-based signals (e.g., hashes, URLs, and keywords associated with child sexual abuse material) to incident-based signals (e.g., user accounts and patterns of coordinated abuse across platforms).⁶⁵ Indeed, such an approach would be beneficial for practitioners in combating violent extremism and terrorism online, especially nihilistic violent extremist networks linked to child sexual abuse material, but this, of course, is contingent on adequate finances and resources being made available for such an undertaking.

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- 44 See Ibid.
- 45 Scrivens, "Examining Online Behaviors of Violent and Non-Violent Right-Wing Extremists During Peak Posting Days."
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