

There has been an increase in domestic terror activity in the past decade, but the United States has failed to dedicate resources to understand and counter this threat. The homeland security enterprise lacks actionable knowledge on how to counter and dismantle the threat because it neglected far-right terrorism (Simi 2010). Still, there is a wealth of research and expertise on international terrorism and criminal organization that can be applied to understand and counter domestic terrorism (Reid and Vasalik 2018). The United States government can build the tools to counter domestic terrorism by examining lessons learned in combatting international terrorism and gangs in tandem with the unique factors known about domestic terrorism. Therefore, to combat domestic terrorism, counterterrorism officials should focus on the far-right virtual communities because they act as gathering places for recruits and recruiters, facilitate the sharing of ideas, and expose more people to the radicalization process.

It is critical for counterterrorism officials to examine virtual communities because they give recruiters direct access to potential recruitment pools. Involvement in a terrorist organization provides a sense of meaning and purpose that counters anxiety towards mortality - and adolescents are not immune to this (McBride 2011). Consequently, far-right recruiters seek out young people in order to manipulate them to believe that this ideology provides the solutions to their problems (Blazak 2001). Individuals who have experienced childhood adversity and adolescent conduct problems are targeted because they are especially vulnerable to this (Simi, Sporer, and Bubolz 2016). Military veterans whose identity of the “military warrior” is threatened are also susceptible to manipulation. Being dishonorably discharged or feeling underappreciated upon return from war clashes with a veteran’s identity and pushes them towards extremism (Simi, Bubolz, and Hardman 2013). Military veterans can turn to domestic

terrorism to protect their identity because it promises the status a dishearten military veteran believes they deserve (McCauley and Moskalenko 2016).

Counterterrorism officials must focus on virtual communities because they offer a platform to share art and ideas that enforce unity among members. Music is a powerful tool that is shared within terrorist's virtual spaces that makes virtual communities just as effective as face-to-face communities at fostering unity among members (Pieslak 2015, Thompson 2001). Music brings with it a multitude of shared cultural experiences such as concerts, language, and clothing that binds a group together (Pieslak 2015). More so, rhythm is more powerful than a song's message because it draws people in and can motivate an individual to act in support of a cause (Pieslak 2015). Conspiracy theories and apocalyptic mindsets shared via virtual communities also strengthen bonds between members by providing answers and a purpose. Conspiracy theories build community by relieving existential anxiety through answers to difficult questions as well as exposing individuals to like-minded believers (Douglass, Sutton, and Cichocka 2017). Similarly, virtual communities spread the views of radical apocalypticism which further build communal bonds by villainizing non-believers (Flannery 2016).

Virtual communities must be targeted because operate as radicalization devices by allowing domestic terrorist organizations to infiltrate the mainstream and enforce their "us versus them" worldview to radicalize members. The far right repackaged their message of racism, xenophobia, and misogyny to infiltrate the mainstream dialogue and engage with "armchair" racists (Perry 2000). Additionally, the internet lowers ideological barriers to entry allowing more individuals to engage with terrorist propaganda and become radicalized (Joosse 2007). Virtual communities are also a safe, cheap, and easy arena to radicalize individuals by encourage demonization of those who reject their views (Holbrook 2019, Thompson 2001). Members can

act upon this mentality in online exchanges and “twitter wars” with individuals from the alt-left (Klein 2019). These online clashes enforce an “us versus them” mentality and further radicalize individuals on both sides because it prevents constructive dialogue (Phillips and Yi 2018).

As the threat of domestic terrorism continues to increase, counterterrorism officials must begin to focus on virtual communities for various reasons. First, they expose vulnerable young people and disheartened military veterans to far-right recruiters. Furthermore, virtual communities provide a platform for members to share and interact with art and ideas - such as music, conspiracy theories, and radical apocalypticism - that pulls them deeper into an organization. Finally, they give domestic terrorists a forum to infiltrate the mainstream and further radicalize their membership through clashes with the alt left. Counterterrorism officials must proactively address the growing domestic terrorism threat by disrupting virtual communities. Disrupting them will cut recruiters off from vulnerable recruits, dismantle communal bonds that enforce a sense of belonging amongst members, and decrease radicalization efforts. If counterterrorism officials can accomplish all three tasks, they will prevent future attacks and move further to the left of boom.

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