

# **Right- Wing Lone Wolves Radicalization on Fringe Forums**

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Submitted to Central European University

Department of International Relations

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MA in International Relations

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9, 135

Vienna, Austria

2021



## **Abstract**

There is much content among scholars in terms of the possibility for self- radicalization of lone wolves in the cyberspace. This thesis explores the possibility of self- radicalization of right- wing lone wolves through online fringe forums. Following Moghaddam's radicalization staircase, it is revealed that the social culture and structural intricacies of fringe platforms like 4chan and 8chan not only make a safe haven for alt- right propaganda in the cyberspace but they also encourage radicalization through various glorification practices of past perpetrators and thus give a birth to copycat lone wolves. Additionally, the thesis explores the issues that intelligence agencies face when tracking individuals on fringe platforms and offers counterterrorist strategies for management of this phenomenon.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my mother who supported me the most during this writing process, as well as during my entire life. I would not have been what I am now if it wasn't for her love and support. I would also like to thank my friends who kept me going during this difficult year, and also my supervisor Dr. Roe who supported me during the thesis writing process.

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## Introduction

The acceleration of the globalization process in the 20th century blurred the physical and political borders. Migration reached an all- time high, prompting the resurgence of various nationalist and trans- nationalist movements whose members embarked on a mission to safeguard and protect their political and social identities from unwanted foreign influence. Similarly to other scrutinized groups, right- wing movements and their followers found a home in the cyber world, an ever- growing and expanding arena accessible from anywhere in the world at any time, be it in Norway, Germany or New Zealand. The content of right- wing materials on the World Wide Web and the way the right- wing groups use the Internet were not given much attention until the early 2010s when the intelligence analysts and scholars alike began to study the phenomenon that was making its resurgence in the Western world, the phenomenon of right- wing lone wolf terrorism.

Lone wolf terrorism is a complex phenomenon in its entirety. Stemming from a nineteenth- century anarchism, lone wolf terrorism (also known as leaderless resistance, freelance terrorism, solo- actor terrorism etc.) has evolved and changed throughout history as different groups resorted to using it as a tactic to advance their political goals. The definition of lone wolf terrorism is, to this day, the major point of content among scholars. For the purpose of this paper, the most widely accepted definition of lone wolf terrorism focusing on three factors will be used, meaning that lone wolf terrorist is thus defined as a “single actor undertaking ideological terrorism (especially political and/ or religious) against non- military targets without external direction or coordination.”<sup>1</sup> The term is therefore used to distinguish and isolate such acts from the acts of terror committed by terrorist organizations, although lone wolves could in a sense, be sympathizers of extremist organization’s ideology or could have

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Feldman, “Comparative Lone Wolf Terrorism: Toward a Heuristic Definition,” *Democracy and Security* 9, no. 3 (2013): 271, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419166.2013.792252>

been involved with an organization and its members at some point for the purpose of obtaining support or even training.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the definition also excludes those individuals who radicalize within an organizational framework but for some reason decide to commit the terrorist attack alone.

The lack of external direction and coordination makes lone wolves virtually undetectable and untraceable and as such they are thought to represent a much greater security risk for the public, especially if one considers that terrorist organizations are usually already “flagged” and under a close watch of national and international security agencies. According to Gabriel Weimann: “Compared to group or network terrorism, lone wolves have a critical advantage -- they more easily avoid identification and detection before and after their attacks since most of them do not reveal their inclinations, visions, and plans.”<sup>3</sup> However, even though lone wolves radicalize, prepare, and execute the attacks on their own, they also seek ideological and logistical/ operational support, be it in regular life or cyberspace, as explained by Jeff Gruenewald: “Lone wolves do not directly associate with other active extremists, but instead, (they) become radicalized through extremist group propaganda, literature, and Internet websites. Evidence of these materials is often found during police investigations following fatal attacks.”<sup>4</sup> One specific kind of lone wolf actor that is standing out to state agencies, researchers, and media in recent years in this sense is right- wing oriented lone wolves.

Unlike radical Islamist online propaganda that is usually tracked and removed at a much quicker rate, right- wing propaganda is said to be flourishing in the cyberspace, especially after the worldwide turn to rightist politics in many Western countries over the past fifteen

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<sup>2</sup> Ramon Spaaij, “The Enigma of Lone Wolf Terrorism: An Assessment,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 856, accessed on April 9, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2010.501426>

<sup>3</sup> Gabriel Weimann, “Lone Wolves in Cyberspace,” *Journal of Terrorism Research* 3, no. 2 (2012): 76, accessed April 9 2021, <http://doi.org/10.15664/jtr.405>

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Gruenewald, Steven Chermak & Joshua D. Freilich, “Far-Right Lone Wolf Homicides in the United States,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36, no. 12 (2013): 1008, accessed April 9, 2021, : <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.84212>

years. One reason for the turn of blind eye to the online right- wing propaganda is that the judicial systems and policymakers in many countries do not necessarily perceive right wing propaganda as a big of a threat as the radical Islamist propaganda. After all, Western countries and their media tend to exclusively focus on the radical Islamist terrorism perpetrated by notorious extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and ISIS, which statistically occurs more often and yields a larger number of victims. As a result, the radical Islamist attacks generate pushback from ideologically opposite groups, most notably the far right.

The rising number of far- right attacks in the recent years has prompted scholars to examine the impact of online right- wing propaganda on the radicalization of right- wing lone wolves and the way that these actors use the Internet for terrorist purposes. Even though the Internet is often mentioned alongside the right- wing lone wolf concept by the media reports post- attack, the academic research on the topic of online radicalization of these individuals remains generalized or focused only on the social media aspect. Internet is an umbrella term for different groups of web sites and social media is just one subgroup. Social media is indeed a place of great significance for the right- wing terrorists, but as highlighted by many scholars, it is predominately used by right wing lone wolves in the later stages, most frequently, to livestream the attacks or publish manifestos. However, it is the so- called fringe platforms (especially those dedicated to gaming) that represent the safe haven for these individuals in the inspirational stages as well as during the radicalization process because the terrorists strive to protect their identity before they strike to avoid being tracked by intelligence units and get persecuted. In this thesis I therefore argue that fringe forums do not only allow right- wing lone wolves to seek ideological and operational support from like- minded individuals, but that their social culture and structural intricacies also encourage the so- called copycat terrorist attacks through veneration practices of previous perpetrators.

## Literature Review

The general consensus among scholars seems to be that just like the collective terrorism, lone wolf terrorism comes in many shapes and forms. No two cases follow the same roadmap from inspiration to execution of the terrorist attacks, but certain patterns seem to repeat themselves to some degree. Prior to Norway 2011 attacks, most of the terrorism literature focused solely on terrorism as a group activity considering that post 9/11 era was characterized by studies on collective terrorism and group dynamics as a part of a coordinated global war on terrorist groups like Al Qaida, Islamic State, and Boko Haram. In the rare instances where the research with a focus on lone actors was conducted, it was dominated by the studies of Islamic- motivated lone actors who pledged allegiance to a certain radical Islamist group post- attack even though they were not guided or ordered to commit the attack by that group. In the recent years there has been a significant shift towards the analysis of left-wing and right- wing lone wolf attacks and various typologies were established to assess the motives, inspirations and factors that play a role in right- wing lone wolf radicalization, a recently more occurring phenomenon in the Western countries.

To begin with, many scholars who are studying lone wolf terrorism disagree over the notion that lone wolves self- radicalize in a vacuum devoid of any interactions with the society and instead they argue that such conceptualization of self- radicalization is nothing but a myth. Radicalization itself is a rather complex umbrella term and there is extensive debate over its definition which goes outside the scope of this paper. Holt et al. have conceptualized radicalization as a “social process stemming from exposure to radical messages via peers and family relationships in the real world, as well as online via websites, forums, and social media.”<sup>5</sup> Even Ramon Spaaij whose definition of lone wolf is the most frequently adopted

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Holt et. al, “Loners, Colleagues, or Peers? Assessing the Social Organization of Radicalization,” *American Journal of Criminal Justice* 44 (2019): 84, accessed on May 1, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12103-018-9439-5>

when studying this phenomenon argues that term “self- radicalization” is problematic and paradoxical<sup>6</sup> because no radicalization process can occur in a complete isolation from social interactions and ties. Bartlett and Miller’s perception however allows some leniency in the terminology usage, as they connect self- radicalization exclusively with the Internet aspect. Their claim is based upon the notion that most lone wolf individuals interact with the pre-recorded graphic propaganda and radical materials rather than the creators of those materials themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Additionally, Weimann is concerned with the question of the extent to which the lone wolves are actually alone. He stresses that: “In nature, wolves do not hunt alone but they hunt in packs”<sup>8</sup> and calls upon Pantucci’s typology of lone wolf subgroups. It is important to mention that Pantucci’s typology is based upon the studies of Islamist lone wolves however the established typology seems to be equally relevant for right- wing lone wolves as well. Pantucci has made an attempt to classify lone wolves into four distinct categories depending on the “means and context of self- radicalization, the tactics of engagement and the framework of available support”<sup>9</sup> and made a distinction between loners, (true) lone wolves, wolf packs and lone attackers. Pantucci’s loners are the isolated individuals who use radical ideology as a form of cover or justification for the terrorist act, and their extremist views are perceived as a pure result of passive absorption of the radical ideological material from cyberspace.

Lone wolves also follow the similar pattern like loners in Pantucci’s perception but even though they act alone in the real world, they show some sort of online world connections (either loose or aspirational) with like- minded individuals. They are proactive in the cyberspace and are frequently expressing their views and convictions on different platforms.

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<sup>6</sup> Spaaij, 867.

<sup>7</sup> Jamie Bartlett and Carl Miller, “The Edge of Violence: Towards Telling the Difference Between Violent and Non-Violent Radicalization,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no.1 (2012): 2, accessed May 17, 2021, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2011.594923>

<sup>8</sup> Weimann, 78.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 78.

Lone wolf packs are made of two or more self- radicalized lone wolves who do not seem to make the step towards connecting with operational extremists but instead “remain within the confines of the broader community of loner terrorists.”<sup>10</sup> Lastly, Pantucci’s lone attackers in fact have more than just aspirational connections with active extremists and those connections span outside of cyber world for various purposes pre- attack. Nevertheless, it is important to mention that lone attackers strike alone and out of their own will rather than attacking due to an order from a terrorist organization. Besides classifying lone wolves into four distinct categories and attempting to resolve some of the terminological issues, Pantucci’s typology clearly demonstrates that the Internet represents a running theme in lone wolf radicalization.

It is without doubt that twenty- first century cyber radicalization occurs in a liberal context characterized by almost uninhibited potential for self- expression on various cyber platforms. Throughout history, information and ideas were restricted and controlled, but the invention of the Internet allowed for the free, efficient, and cost- effective flow of information from one corner of the world to the other in very little time. Jiries observed that due to this aspect of Internet “many ideologies can easily spread and take root in a number of culturally unrelated areas, tying diverse individuals from all over the world with common views and agendas in a matter of seconds.”<sup>11</sup> However, Jiries does not go deep enough in her research to make a connection between the availability of propaganda on Internet and the consummation of propaganda that results in radicalization. On the other hand, Archetti emphasizes that exclusively pointing fingers at the Internet for radicalization and subsequent terrorist activity is nothing but the so- called technological determinism. She further stresses that the mere existence of the propaganda material on the Internet does not necessarily equate consumption

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<sup>10</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, “A Typology of Lone Wolves: Preliminary Analysis of Lone Islamist Terrorists,” *Developments in Radicalisation and Political Violence* (2011): 25, accessed May 12, 2021, [https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/1302002992ICSRPaper\\_ATypologyofLoneWolves\\_Pantucci.pdf](https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/1302002992ICSRPaper_ATypologyofLoneWolves_Pantucci.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Tanja Dramac Jiries, “Rise of Radicalization in the Global Village: Online Radicalization vs. In-person Radicalization - Is There a Difference?,” *Journal For Deradicalization* 6 (2016): 215, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/48>

of the said materials by the audience nor that such materials necessarily influence the audience.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, radicalization is understood as rather being *facilitated* than *caused* solely by the Internet because radicalization's online aspects cannot be entirely separated from those of the offline radicalization processes.<sup>13</sup>

The most detailed study on the ways in which Internet facilitates lone wolves' radicalization was conducted by Conway et al. who traced the Western right- wing extremists' Internet usage from the very first years of Internet's existence. Conway discovered that right- wing extremists were among the first ones to adopt Internet technology for violent extremist purposes.<sup>14</sup> They created static websites to publish their original propaganda and connect with like- minded individuals as early as mid- nineties, when the Internet was just starting to gain popularity. However, the expansion of social media and the general population's move from the static websites pushed right- wing extremists to also transfer their activities in this particular arena of the World Wide Web. Social media allowed the extremists to be proactive and instead of waiting for like- minded individuals to search for and find their static propaganda websites, they could now reach them more easily and even assess the extent to which those individuals would be receptive to ideology based on their social media profiles. However, similarly to Conway, Ekman has highlighted that the research focusing on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter as platforms for radicalization is limited for three reasons.

The first reason is that there is a difference in the content between the public propaganda pages and closed groups on Facebook. "Unlike the closed groups deployed by activists for networking, coordination, movement building, and group cohesion, the open platform is far

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<sup>12</sup> Christina Archetti, "Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no.1 (2015): 50, accessed on May 12, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26297326>

<sup>13</sup> Charlie Winter, Peter Neumann et al., Online Extremism: Research Trends in Internet Activism, Radicalization, and Counter-Strategies," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence* 14, no.2 (2020): 10, accessed on May 30, 2021, 10.4119/ijcv-3809

<sup>14</sup> Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens & Logan Macnair, "Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence:: History and Contemporary Trends," *International Centre for Counterterrorism* (2019): 2, accessed on May 30, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19623>.

more sanitized”<sup>15</sup>, argues Ekman. Since researchers do not have the access to closed groups, the results of the research show discrepancies as they do not necessarily represent the reality of right- wing content on social media. Furthermore, the most famous social media sites are known to be collaborating with the authorities in case of suspicious content which poses a serious privacy concern for individuals who actively engage with the content. Ultimately, social media sites make use of algorithms that automatically remove all content that does not fall under the specified guidelines as well as give the general public the opportunity to report hateful content. Indeed, social media does seem to have some sort of impact in inspiration and radicalization of right- wing lone wolves as the research suggests, but Conway concludes that it is not as attractive of a platform to right- wing lone wolves in initial stages as much as the earlier research implied.

So where do the right- wing lone wolves seek inspiration and radicalize in the online sphere outside of static right- wing websites and social media? Besides the more niche social media applications like Telegraph or Signal which many researchers suggest as “it” places for modern day right- wing lone wolf facilitator role in the processes of inspiration and radicalization, the so- called “fringe” platforms are also suggested as a possible arena. However, the research on these “fringe” platforms outside of the communication field remains scarce and surface levelled, and it is evident when searching for the definition for this phenomenon as they are simply referred to and explained as “home to some of the savviest social media users on the planet and have become fertile ground for cultivating reputational threats.”<sup>16</sup> This thesis will thus attempt to bridge a gap in the academic literature by focusing on the role of fringe forums in inspiration and radicalization of right- wing lone wolves. It will

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<sup>15</sup> Mattias Ekman, “Anti-refugee Mobilization in Social Media: The Case of Soldiers of Odin,” *Social Media + Society Journal* 4, no.1 (2018):6, accessed on May 12, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118764431>

<sup>16</sup> Ebonie Newman, “The Rise of Fringe Social Platforms,” O’Dwyers, published July 26, 2019, accessed May 12, 2021, <https://www.odwyerpr.com/story/public/12860/2019-07-26/rise-fringe-social-platforms.html>



look into the ways in which fringe forums facilitate ideological and operational support seeking through the qualitative study of two highly publicized cases from different parts of the world. Furthermore, the thesis will explore the extent to which the forum culture creates copycat lone wolves through veneration of previous perpetrators, and ultimately investigate the issues that intelligence agencies encounter in terms of right- wing lone wolf tracking in this particular arena of cyberspace.

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 Methodology

In order to examine the role of fringe sites in inspiration and radicalization of right-wing lone wolves, a combination of qualitative research methods will be used in the paper. First, this thesis will engage in a comparative case study of two right-wing lone wolf terrorist attacks that occurred in the period from 2010 to 2019 in two different countries, New Zealand (Brenton Harrison Tarrant) and the United States of America (John Timothy Earnest). The cases were selected based on the most-different method (method of agreement) where only one factor and the outcome are similar among the cases, with the factor being the usage of fringe forums and the outcome being a terrorist attack. The comparative case study will be helpful in establishing whether the two right-wing lone wolves were inspired by each other to engage in the acts of “copycat” terrorism.

In addition, I will use process tracing to analyse the cases individually throughout the application of Moghaddam’s staircase theory of radicalization. Moghaddam’s staircase theory is based upon a psychological metaphor that there is a step-by-step individual process to terrorism. McCauley and Moskalenko have described the staircase theory as a “stage model set at the individual level: each floor must be traversed to get to the next higher floor and the order of floors is fixed. The difference between justifying terrorism (third floor) and joining a terrorist group (fourth floor) is the difference between radical opinion and radical action.”<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, staircase theory steps are conceptualized in a way that the individuals represent the ones who make a decision to go higher or stay on a specific floor, depending on their

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<sup>17</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model,” *American Psychologist* 72, no.3 (2017): 4, accessed on May 12, 2021, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000062>

perception of the whole “building” and the assessment of the choices behind “the doors they think are open to them.”<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, considering that some of the fringe platform sites (namely, 8chan) that individuals from the selected two cases frequented ended up getting taken down as well as these individuals’ posts, I used the archive website called 4plebs to retrieve some of the posts of other fringe forum members for the analysis. The retrieved posts depict the social dynamic of these websites and will guide the discussion around the copycat segment. Considering this limitation, the supporting information for the analysis is gathered from scholarly journals, previous research, and media outlets as well as from the individuals’ manifestos where applicable.

Chapter 1 traces the process of radicalization of right- wing lone wolves Brenton Harrison Tarrant (New Zealand) and John Timothy Earnest (United States of America) throughout Moghaddam’s radicalization staircase and in relation to their usage of fringe platforms. The argument here is that the social culture and the manner of communication on these platforms facilitated the process of their radicalization and inspired them to commit the attacks. In Chapter 2 the author of this thesis will explore the argument that the social culture of the fringe platforms in question (4chan, 8chan) creates copycat lone wolves through veneration of previous perpetrators. Lastly Chapter 3 analyses the issues that intelligence agencies and lawmakers face when attempting to/ tracking the right- wing lone wolves on these platforms, as well as the possible strategies for prevention of the radicalization process stages that occur on fringe websites.

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<sup>18</sup> Fathali Moghaddam, “The Staircase to Terrorism,” *American Psychologist* 60, no.2 (2005): 161, accessed on May 12, 2021, 10.1037/0003-066X.60.2.161

## 1.2 Moghaddam's Staircase Theory

As previously mentioned, Moghaddam's staircase theory consists of six individual stages where the border between radical opinion and radical action is set between the stage 3 and stage 4. The ground floor is where the general population "resides", and it is characterized by feelings of injustice and deprivation. Those who make the first step are said to be seeking solutions to the perceived injustice/ deprivation however it is the choice of adequate or inadequate measure to address the issue that determines if an individual will move towards the next level on the radicalization staircase or not. The key word that Moghaddam emphasizes in his definition of the ground floor is the word perceived as he states that: "In recent decades, rapidly rising expectations, nourished by images of affluence and democratic lifestyles spread by the international mass media, have fuelled feelings of deprivation among vast populations."<sup>19</sup> Psychologically speaking, feelings of injustice and deprivation are a subjective experience guided by many factors such as an individual's outlook on life, his/ her living conditions, status in the society etc. It is upon an individual on how he/ she decides to address these feelings, whether turning inwards or displacing the frustration, whether gearing towards solving the issue peacefully or violently.

Second floor is where the aggression becomes operationalized and displaced onto an object or a person and it leads to the third floor where the individual begins to sympathise with like- minded individuals who offer an alternative solution to the problem. Crossing the path from second to third floor is characterized by shifts in one's morality. The individual understands that the solution offered by an already radicalized person is not moral according to the wider society's standards, however he/ she becomes persuaded as the time passes and the frustration grows. Lastly, Moghaddam explains that the fourth and fifth floor represent the

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<sup>19</sup> Moghaddam, 161.

action: recruitment to the mission/ terrorist organization, and ultimately, the attack.<sup>20</sup> Commitment to the cause grows the longer the individual stays on the fourth level as one begins to feel like they have found their place in the world. It is important to mention that Moghaddam's theory is based on collective Islamist terrorism, however the steps remain similar with minor tweaks. It is the lack of feeling of belonging to a community which is found on the fourth level that is missing in case of right- wing lone wolves. Furthermore, Moghaddam states that: "During their stay on the fourth floor, then, individuals find that their options have narrowed considerably. They are now part of a tightly controlled group from which they cannot exit alive."<sup>21</sup> This is a segment that is different for (right- wing) lone wolves as they act purely out of their own conscience and for their personal ideological reasons, and as such are not forced to act by someone on a hierarchically higher position who could be threatening their lives.

Moghaddam's steps/ floors of staircase radicalization are visualised on Figure 1.

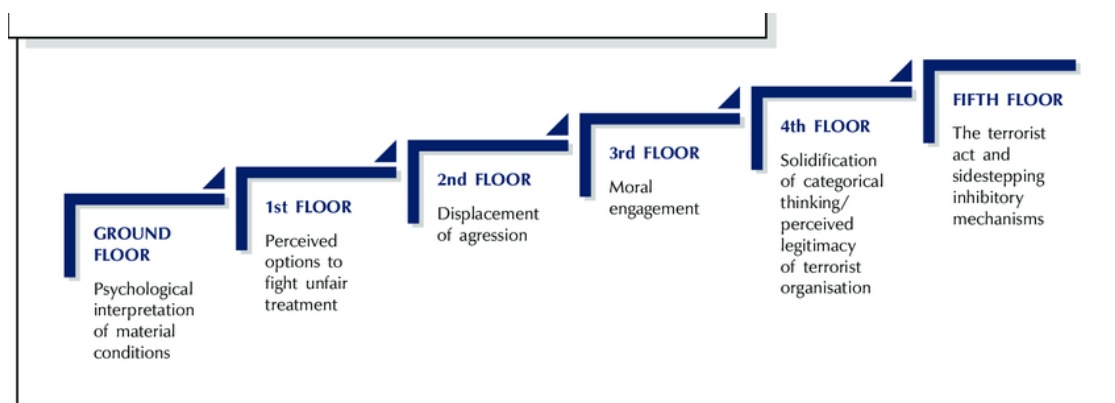


Figure 1 Moghaddam's Staircase Theory

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 161.

### 1.3 Case Studies

As previously mentioned, the cases chosen for the analysis were selected through the method of agreement where only one factor and the outcome are similar among the cases. The similar factor for the two selected cases is that both right-wing lone wolves' have actively used fringe forums prior to the terrorist attack. In the following part, I will test Moghaddam's theory of staircase radicalization on each case to argue that the social culture and the manner of communication on fringe platforms facilitated the process of radicalization and inspired these right-wing lone wolves to commit the attacks.

#### 1.3.1 Brenton Harrison Tarrant

Brenton Harrison Tarrant, a native Australian white supremacist moved to Christchurch, New Zealand in 2017 after visiting multiple Christian European battle sites throughout Europe (the Balkans, Germany, and Austria) and meeting up with several far-right groups' leaders. Two years later, on 15 March 2019, he opened fire in two mosques (Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre) during Friday prayer, killing 51 people and injuring 40 after announcing the attack on the 8chan platform as well as streaming it on Facebook live.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, in his original post on 8chan, Tarrant also published his manifesto titled "The Great Replacement" and provided a link for the Facebook live. It is evident from these two events that the use of the Internet for terrorist purposes was a significant segment of Tarrant's case. The media also highlighted that: "Hours after the Christchurch shooting, six of the top seven 'boards' or message rooms on 8chan were about the attack, including one titled 'Brenton Tarrant appreciation station'."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Nick Perry, "Report Finds Lapses Ahead of New Zealand Mosque Attack," AP News, published December 8, 2020, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/intelligence-agencies-shootings-brenton-tarrant-new-zealand-new-zealand-mosque-attacks-d8217fa30fe4eeba45fb001b77857385>

<sup>23</sup> James Purtill, "Fuelled by a toxic, alt-right echo chamber, Christchurch shooter's views were celebrated online," ABC Australia, published March 15, 2019, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/christchurch-shooters-views-were-celebrated-online/10907056>

The post- attack investigation report revealed that even as a little kid, Tarrant had a “unsupervised access to the internet and became interested in video games from the age of 6 or 7. He began expressing racist ideas from a young age and told his mother he started using the 4chan internet forum from age 14.”<sup>24</sup> When looking at Tarrant’s manifesto vocabulary, one can easily notice that it is written in vocabulary characteristic of 4chan/ 8chan social dynamic: it is written in overly aggressive tone as well as overloaded with profanity and politically incorrect and offensive terms. Another aspect characteristic of fringe forums that is found in Tarrant’s manifesto is the use of memes. Mariam Webster dictionary defines meme as: “an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media.”<sup>25</sup> Figure 2 shows an example of the 8chan vocabulary that is found in Brenton Tarrant’s manifesto:

Who am I? What kind of dumb question is that anyway?

**Why did you carry out the attack?**

Bunch of drunk, devil worshipping homosexuals if you ask me, pushing that sex-change propaganda of theirs. No different than those pornographic transvestites walking around, corrupting our women into filth-loving degenerates, praising their gods with fits of drunken debauchery. Obsessed with attracting the required trans-homo female virgins to sacrifice to the Devil. It's central to their overall homosexual propaganda campaign!! The worst thing about it is, they're all gay! Every one of them! You mark my words, THEY'RE ALL GAY!!!

Don't let Muslims fool you. We don't know what's going on under those robes, but THEY do. Nudge-nudge, wink-wink :)

*Figure 2 Example of 8chan vocabulary found in Tarrant's manifesto*

(Source: Brenton Tarrant’s manifesto)

<sup>24</sup> Nick Perry, “Report Finds Lapses Ahead of New Zealand Mosque Attack” AP News, published December 8, 2020, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/intelligence-agencies-shootings-brenton-tarrant-new-zealand-new-zealand-mosque-attacks-d8217fa30fe4eeba45fb001b77857385>

<sup>25</sup> Mariam Webster Dictionary

Furthermore, throughout the analysis of the post in which Tarrant announces his attack as well as various parts from his manifesto, one can easily watch Tarrant move from one step to another on Moghaddam's staircase of radicalization. An example excerpt from Tarrant's manifesto that can be found under Figure 3 contains the evidence of Tarrant moving from the ground floor through the first three steps on Moghaddam's staircase. He explicitly states his discontent and displaces it onto a particular group ("Europe is overrun by Muslims") and then questions whether he should take the action ("Why do not I do something? Why not me? If not me, then who? Why them when I could do it myself?").<sup>26</sup>

Why did we let the Muslims and darkies do this? Why  
did we let the Muslims and darkies do this TO US? Why  
won't somebody do something? Why?

WHY WON'T SOMEBODY DO SOMETHING?

WHY WON'T SOMEBODY DO SOMETHING?

WHY DON'T I DO SOMETHING?

The spell broke, why don't I do something?  
Why not me?  
If not me, then who?  
Why them when I could do it myself?  
It was there I decided to do something, it was there I  
decided to take action, to commit to force. To commit to  
violence.

*Figure 3 Transition from radicalization of opinion to radicalization of action*

<sup>26</sup> Brenton Tarrant, "The Great Replacement," 2019, 18.



In his attack announcement post he thanks the 8chan social community: "It's been a long ride and despite all your rampant fa\*\*\*try, fecklessness and degeneracy, you are all top blokes and the best bunch of cobbers a man could ask for."<sup>27</sup> This specific excerpt from the pre- attack post demonstrates that Tarrant recognizes the ideological support from his 8chan like- minded user community. On the other hand, Tarrant also seeks operational support in the same post by asking his fellow 8chan members to “do your (their) part by spreading my (his) message, making memes and s\*\*\*posting like you usually do.”<sup>28</sup> Figure 4 shows an example of like- minded platform users encouraging him by posting memes and wishing him good luck in his “quest”. In addition, Figures 5 and 6 show the overwhelming support and approval that Tarrant received pre and post attack.



Figure 4 Tarrant's attack announcement and users' support

(source: 8chan archive)

<sup>27</sup> Brenton Tarrant's 8chan post

<sup>28</sup> Brenton Tarrant's 8chan post

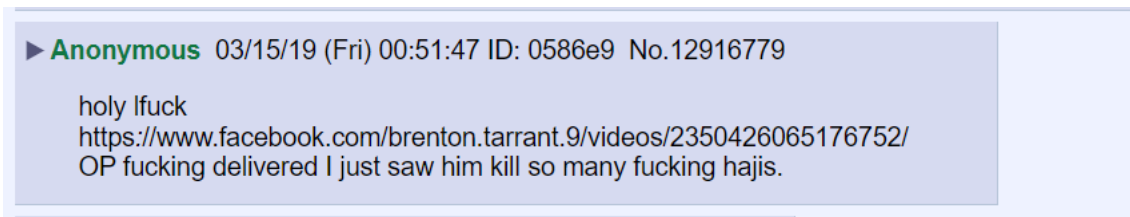


Figure 5 Support for Tarrant's attack

(source: 8chan archive)



Figure 6 Support for Tarrant post-attack

(source: 8chan archive)

### 1.3.2 John Timothy Earnest

The second highly publicized case where the right- wing lone wolf was also found to be using fringe platforms prior to attack was the case of John Timothy Earnest. John Timothy Earnest, a nursing student with a clean criminal record and no prior contact with the legal system, stormed Poway Synagogue in Poway, California on April 27, 2019. Armed with an AR- 15 rifle and wearing a tactical protective vest, he attacked the synagogue during the Shabbat prayer, on the last day of one of the biggest Jewish holidays, Passover. Earnest

managed to injure the synagogue's rabbi and three other people as well as kill one woman (who according to the witnesses tried to shield the rabbi) before fleeing the scene and calling the police himself.<sup>29</sup> The witnesses have stated that the only reason that pushed Earnest to flee the scene and not shoot around hundred other people (including children) was the fact that his rifle malfunctioned.<sup>30</sup>

Similarly to Brenton Tarrant, John Earnest also frequented various fringe platforms including 4chan and 8chan. Prior to committing his attack on the Poway synagogue, he published a post on 8chan, thanking his like- minded supporters and attaching several links to the livestream he intended to have during shooting (it is not known whether parts of the attack were live streamed or not after all). In the 8chan post, Earnest stated: "It has been real dudes. From the bottom of my heart thank you for everything. Keep up the infographic red pill threads. I have only been lurking for a year and a half, yet what I have learned here is priceless. It's been an honor."<sup>31</sup> This excerpt from Earnest's post demonstrates that he used the forum as a learning arena for a year and a half, seeking inspiration and acquainting himself with the ideological and terminological terms characteristic of the right- wing 8chan community. The post that John Earnest made prior to the attack is shown under Figure 7.

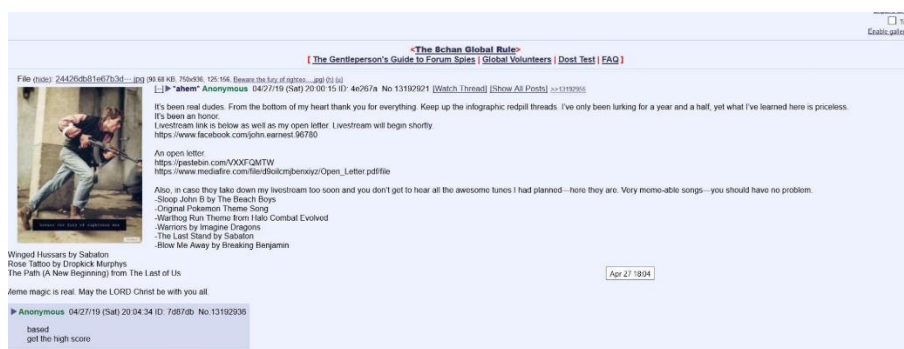


Figure 7 John Earnest's attack announcement (source 8chan archive)

<sup>29</sup> "San Diego synagogue shooting: One person dead in Poway, California," BBC Online, published April 28, 2019, accessed May 30, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-48081535>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> John Earnest's 8chan post

The term “red pill” that Earnest uses to refer to material he wishes to preserve on the 8chan platform has two equally important meanings. The first meaning is related to the 1999 movie “The Matrix” scene where one of the characters finds that he is living in a simulation and is prompted to choose between the red pill and blue pill. The blue pill represents the ignorance (remaining as a part of simulation), and the red pill represents the willingness to take charge or learn more about your perceived truth.<sup>32</sup> In this sense, Earnest is instructing his community of like- minded individuals to take action in the form of continuing to post ideological material that made him “woke” as he believes that such information is the ultimate truth and as such needs to be spread further. However, the term “red pill” also assumes another meaning which is characteristic of the so- called “men’s rights movement”, a backlash against feminist movement which has found a place in the male- dominated fringe forums.<sup>33</sup> The term “red pill” is therefore also used to mock feminist movement in these communities through meme threads ridiculing women and thus could also be an alternate explanation of what Earnest meant in his post.

In addition to the “thank you” note and the links to the attack live stream, Earnest also published a link to his “Open Letter”, a relatively short manifesto (of 9 pages) in which he explains his motivations for the attack. Earnest expresses strong anti- Semitic (anti- Zionist) motives and states that: “Every Jew is responsible for the meticulously planned genocide of the European race. They act as a unit, and every Jew plays his part to enslave the other races around him—whether consciously or subconsciously. Their crimes are endless.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> David Boroff, “Matrix Reloaded: What Does ‘Take a Red or a Blue Pill Mean?’”, The Sun Online, published May 18, 2020, accessed on May 29, 2021, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/11651064/elon-musk-the-matrix-red-pill-blue/>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> John Earnest, “Open Letter,” 2019

From the first line of his open letter, it is visible that it is modelled after Tarrant's manifesto. The open letter includes the question & answer section where Earnest describes what prompted him to "seek truth" and commit the attack. He confesses that he "scorched a mosque in Escondido with gasoline a week after Brenton Tarrant's sacrifice and they never found s\*\*t on me" and as well admits that he painted graffiti on the parking lot in front of the mosque leading the police to 8chan forum by using a /pol/ reference characteristic of thread names on 8chan and 4chan. The language he uses is also reminiscent of Tarrant's: derogatory to specific ethnic groups, overflowing with profanities and thus reflective of the 8chan/ 4chan community slang. However, Earnest's manifesto also contains multiple Bible references alluding to the elements of strong Christian nationalist/ Nazi ideology. Furthermore, Earnest dedicates one whole section to the 8chan community, calling them to follow his and Brenton Tarrant's path, and giving instructions on attack planning and preparation.

The steps from the Moghaddam's radicalization staircase can also be observed from Earnest's manifesto as he describes the path towards the martyrdom. His ground floor discontent was the perceived Jewish dominance in the world that he felt was threatening to Christian identity. Earnest felt like he had to do something to preserve what he refers to as European race and therefore he began looking for possible solutions (move to the first floor of the radicalization staircase). In his manifesto, he describes the three possible solutions to addressing the issue: "There are three roles that must be played in this revolution. Those who spread the truth, those who defend the race, and those who continue the race (having children)."<sup>35</sup> At this point, he describes how Tarrant was a personal catalyst for him: "If you told me even 6 months ago that I would do this I would have been surprised... Tarrant was a catalyst for me personally. He showed me that it could be done. And that it needed to be

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

done.”<sup>36</sup> This is the point where the transition from third to fourth step of Moghaddam’s radicalization staircase occurs as morally engaged Earnest begins to resonate with Tarrant’s actions. The support of like- minded 8chan individuals at the time of posting (example comment: “Get the high score”) about his attack eventually leads to the transition from step 4 to step 5 and Earnest commits the terrorist attack.

Both Brenton Tarrant and John Earnest were active users of the 4chan and 8chan fringe platforms which reflected throughout their process of radicalization and pre- attack activities. Indeed, they harboured right- wing ideologies outside of the world of cyber platforms but it was in this particular place that they found an acceptance in terms of their ideological inclination. They did not have to directly communicate with other like- minded individuals on these platforms; they conversed through memes and absorbed the content through memes, fuelling their resentment towards Muslims in Brenton Tarrant’s case and Jews in John Earnest case. They understood the language and dynamics of the community, and they knew what types of posts generate more feedback and/ or backlash. In short, Tarrant and Earnest were aware of the fringe platforms’ potential to act as an echo chamber. They both proudly announced their attacks to get viewership, support as well as appraisal from 8chan/ 4chan users. The users on the other hand delivered. They commented, shared, and re- shared Tarrant’s and Earnest’s manifestos and links to the streams. They made memes of encouragement and wished them “good kill” and luck on their “quests.” Except for the occasional “Lol you are crazy” post, the fringe forum users generally did not discourage them nor did they attempt to discern whether the threats were serious.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 2

As observed in the previous chapter through cases of Brenton Harrison Tarrant and John Timothy Earnest, the social culture of fringe platforms and the communicational dynamic have a notable impact on the inspiration and the subsequent radicalization process of right-wing lone wolves. However, the impact of fringe forums social culture does not stop there: I argue that the social culture of these platforms also creates copycat lone wolves through the process of veneration of previous perpetrators as one could observe it in the case of John Earnest. Copycat lone wolves notice the attention that the previous perpetrators got and in addition to fulfilling their “mission” (terrorist attack), they also seek to emulate the attention that the others achieved and to also become an object of glorification and veneration on these platforms. Chapter 2 will thus explore the structural intricacies of 4chan and 8chan fringe platforms that play a role in radicalization and the extent to which the veneration practices used by platforms’ users to glorify the previous perpetrators play a role in the creation of copycat lone wolves.

### 2.1 The Structural Intricacies of Fringe Platforms

4chan, the most popular fringe platform was created in the early 2000s by a self-proclaimed Internet guru Christopher Poole who modelled it after a Japanese imageboard site known as 2chan or Futaba Channel.<sup>37</sup> Structurally speaking, 4chan is an anonymous image board (bulletin- board style), where the users can post both the image and the text in one single post. Each theme represents a subforum/ board where the users share their interests, ranging from gaming to cooking and even pornography. The anonymity aspect is the main characteristic of this platform as the “general discourse of the website encourages users to remain unnamed.”<sup>38</sup> The anonymity aspect is especially significant for the more niche boards

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<sup>37</sup> Dillon Ludeman, “/pol/emics: Ambiguity, scales, and digital discourse on 4chan,” *Discourse, Context and Media* 24 (2018): 92, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.01.010>

<sup>38</sup> Ludeman, 92.

that are frequented by right- wing oriented individuals, among others. However, it is not just the aspect of anonymity that attracts the so- called “vile Internet users” to comment on 4chan but in addition to it, there is also the structural algorithmic “catch”: the posts get deleted after a certain number of responses is reached unless the user himself/ herself archives it but even then, it takes a great platform knowledge to locate it in the archives.

The fact that the posts get deleted in such a manner, in a way encourages the users to engage in the discussions more passionately to voice their discontent and their often politically incorrect views. An example of this is the /pol/ board where right- wing leaning individuals tend to congregate. Robert Evans explains that: “The overarching goal of /pol/, held by most of its members, is to radicalize their fellow anons to ‘real-life effortposting,’ i.e. acts of violence in the physical world.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly to Evans, Elley argues that: “The community on /pol/ keeps its participants engaged by stimulating outrage and anger, and by engaging readers in a conspiracist narrative where the far right is the only trustworthy source of information.”<sup>40</sup> The posts containing right- wing propaganda on this board are in a sense intended to act as “red pill”, that is, to make those already discontent users “aware of the reality” and thus further ideologically indoctrinate them. Most of the “red pills” are conspiracy theories that build on one another and cause a chain reaction, meaning that the individual dives deeper and deeper into the materials until he/ she has completely dissociated from the general society’s perception of the world.

Modelled after 4chan, 8chan (now known as 8kun) was another popular platform for right- wing ideologues that many researchers including Colley and Moore depict as a “more

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<sup>39</sup> Robert Evans, “Ignore The Poway Synagogue Shooter’s Manifesto: Pay Attention To 8chan’s /pol/ Board,” Bellingcat Online, published April 28, 2019, accessed May 30, 2021, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/04/28/ignore-the-poway-synagogue-shooters-manifesto-pay-attention-to-8chans-pol-board/>

<sup>40</sup> Ben Elley, ““The rebirth of the West begins with you!”— Self-improvement as radicalisation on 4chan,” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, no.61 (2021): 2, accessed on May 30, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00732>



vile version of 4chan.”<sup>41</sup> The reason for the creation of the 8chan platform was that in 2013, 4chan became involved in a scandal called Gamergate, an online harassment campaign in which the users of 4chan targeted female videogame creators.<sup>42</sup> 8chan was created by an avid neo- Nazi Fredrick Brennan, as a sanctuary to those who felt that 4chan was becoming more and more censored and who wanted more permissive posting policies.<sup>43</sup> The main characteristic of 8chan was almost the absolute lack of moderation of posts and 8chan quickly replaced 4chan as an “it” right- wing platform. Both Brenton Tarrant and John Earnest used 8chan in addition to 4chan but ultimately selected 8chan as the platform to which they published their manifestos.

There are three possible reasons for 8chan taking precedence over 4chan for Tarrant and Earnest. The first two were the lack of moderation and the fact that following the Gamergate, 8chan was overflowing with like- minded right- wing individuals. This was important because it meant that their posts were going to have a much bigger reach within the community where a lot of individuals were on the brink from following in their footsteps. The third reason was that 8chan platform was hosted in the Philippines, a country known for its lack of Internet laws (unlike 4chan which is hosted in the United States).<sup>44</sup> Therefore, posting on the 8chan in a way ensured that Tarrant’s and Earnest’s planned attacks were not spoiled by the intelligence units of their respective countries.

## 2.2 From Veneration of Saints to Copycats

If one looks at the general content on 4chan (and even today’s 8kun, the remnant of 8chan) outside the obviously right- wing extremist frequented boards (such as /pol/ board on

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Colley and Martin Moore, “The challenges of studying 4chan and the Alt-Right: ‘Come on in the water’s fine,’” *New Media and Society* (2020): 5, accessed on May 30, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820948803>

<sup>42</sup> Julia Carrie Wong, “8chan: the far-right website linked to the rise in hate crimes,” *The Guardian*, accessed May 28, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/aug/04/mass-shootings-el-paso-texas-dayton-ohio-8chan-far-right-website>

<sup>43</sup> Sal Hagen, Anthony Burton et. al, “Infinity’s Abyss: An Overview of 8chan,” OILab, accessed May 30, 2021, <https://oilab.eu/infinitys-abyss-an-overview-of-8chan/>

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

4chan for example), one can notice the almost uncomfortable obsession of users with derogatory, misogynistic, and dark content. The content themes are ranging from hatred and defamation of certain ethnic and national groups to sitewide excitement and euphoria over violent video games. Similarly to how people cheer on each other while playing competitive games, the users of 4chan cheer and applaud the users who post unconventional, taboo things on the platform or announce their past or future engagement in the acts of violence. As observed in the chapter 1, the users used memes and references to the videogame killings (e.g. “get the high score”) to encourage and support Tarrant and Earnest on their original posts prior to the attack. However, these forms of support and encouragement to the lone wolves have an even more sinister consequence: they facilitate the creation of copycat perpetrators.

The creation of copycats occurs through the veneration process of the “model” perpetrator. Those lone wolves whose terrorist activities caused numerous casualties (for example Tarrant or Anders Behring Breivik) become regarded to as saints and worshipped by the like-minded individuals for “succeeding in a mission.”<sup>45</sup> The most frequent form of worship method is through the posts on the same thread boards that the perpetrators used to frequent before the attack and through the digitally altered memes representing them as Christian saints or characters of popular video games. The original “saint” of the right-wing extremists on 4chan and 8chan was Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian right-wing lone wolf whose 2011 consecutive attacks on youth camp on the island of Utoya and Norwegian government building in Oslo yielded the largest number of casualties (77) caused by a right-wing lone wolf attack in the modern age.<sup>46</sup> In his manifesto, Tarrant referred to Breivik as one of the inspirational figures for his attack. However, Tarrant’s direct engagement with the

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Evans, “Ignore The Poway Synagogue Shooter’s Manifesto: Pay Attention To 8chan’s /pol/ Board,” Bellingcat Online, published April 28, 2019, accessed May 30, 2021, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/americas/2019/04/28/ignore-the-poway-synagogue-shooters-manifesto-pay-attention-to-8chans-pol-board/>

<sup>46</sup> “Norway Attacks: The Victims,” BBC Online, published on March 15, 2016, accessed on May 30, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-14276074>

platform prior to the execution of attack and the fact that he was the first right- wing lone wolf who streamed his rampage, canonized him as the ultimate saint to right- wing extremists on 4chan and 8chan. Figure 8 depicts Brenton Tarrant as a robot and Figure 9 depicts him as a saint with a halo around his head.



Figure 8 Brenton Tarrant depicted as video game Transformer (source: 8chan)

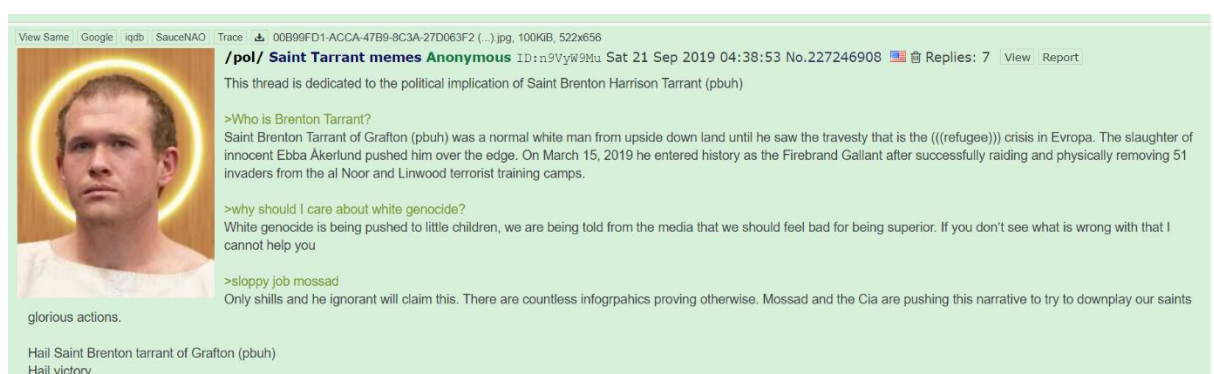


Figure 9 Brenton Tarrant depicted as saint (source 8chan archives)

The previous perpetrators thus gained a cult following based on the scope of the attack and the number of casualties they caused. For example, a simple 4chan search has shown that there still exists a thread titled “Praise Saint Tarrant”. Considering that the threads are removed once they reach a certain number of posts, this specific discovery demonstrates the ongoing glorification of Tarrant’s acts even two years after his attack. However, another way in which the previous perpetrators are glorified, which also aids in the radicalization of the future copycat lone wolves is through the translation of the saints’ manifestos on alternative languages. It is in this way that the manifestos become available to potential copycats whose first language is not necessarily English and it is also a way to spread the propaganda beyond the 4chan/ 8chan community. Furthermore, the glorification posts also contain poetry, “outfit inspiration” homages (e.g. wearing tactical gear reminiscent of what the terrorist wore during the attack), and even pictures of shrines set up by the worshippers.

Seeing the overwhelming support pre- attack and the fame that led to the canonization of lone wolf terrorists such as Breivik and Tarrant as right- wing saints, inspires like- minded individuals to commit the copycat terrorist attacks. For example, a common occurrence in the series of 2019 terrorist attacks committed in Germany (Stephan Balliet), United States of America (Patrick Crusius) and Norway (Phillip Manshaus) was that they referred to either Breivik or Tarrant as an inspiration. Manshaus even stated in one of his 4chan posts that he was “elected by the saint Tarrant” to carry out the legacy.<sup>47</sup> The copycat lone wolves therefore seek the community’s approval and praise and perceive themselves as the “disciples” of the platforms’ proclaimed saints.

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<sup>47</sup> Graham Macklin, “The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age,” *Combating Terrorism Center* 12, no.6 (2019): 24, accessed May 30, 2021, <https://ctc.usma.edu/christchurch-attacks-livestream-terror-viral-video-age/>

## Chapter 3

Chapters 1 and 2 examined the fringe platforms' (4chan and 8chan) role in facilitation of right- wing lone wolves' radicalization in the online sphere. In chapter 1, the author of this thesis examined the social culture of fringe platforms and the communicational dynamic impact on the inspiration and the subsequent radicalization process of right- wing lone wolves. Chapter 2 dealt with an analysis of lone wolf glorification practices that play a role in the creation of copycat lone wolves, who happen to be motivated equally by the sense of communal belonging as well as the wish to have their actions immortalized and venerated just like their idols'. In a wild and fast- moving space such as fringe platforms, frequented by the electronic savvy extremist individuals, tracing posts, and putting a face to a username becomes a rather difficult, if not almost impossible task for intelligence agencies and lawmakers. Chapter 3 thus dissects the issues that the state agencies face in regards to fringe platforms like 4chan and 8chan, and analyses the possibilities for counteracting radicalization processes that occur on these platforms as well as strategies for discerning whether a possible attack announcement post is truly an attack announcement or purely a troll post.

### 3.1 Tracing the Lone Wolves on Fringe Platforms: The Challenge

To begin with, the most significant issue encountered by the intelligence agencies in terms of fringe platforms is the problem of the unique and peculiar language that the users use to communicate among themselves. If one were to take profanity and politically incorrect language aside, one would notice that the vocabulary of right- wing users who frequent platforms such as 4chan or 8chan is more often than not inspired by the obscure references to popular culture artifacts such as movies, video games, books, music, etc.<sup>48</sup> A useful example

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<sup>48</sup> Marc Tuters and Sal Hagen, “(((They))) rule: Memetic antagonism and nebulous othering on 4chan,” *New Media and Society* 22, no. 12 (2020): 2224, accessed on May 31, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819888746>

of the popular culture reference is the “red pill” concept from the 90s movie “The Matrix” that John Earnest used in his attack announcement post. Furthermore, right- wing individuals who engaged with Tarrant and Earnest’s attack announcement posts as well as glorified their killing sprees in the subsequent posts and memes, used the vocabulary characteristic of the shooting- action games like Fortnite, Counter Strike, and World of Warcraft to do so. Moreover, the language on 4chan and 8chan platforms is frequently indicative of trolling practices that these individuals engage in. Cambridge dictionary defines trolling as: “the act of leaving an insulting message on the internet in order to annoy someone.”<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the issue often lies in the fact that not only intelligence units (who are scouring these platforms for information) but also the users of the platforms, can rarely tell whether an exceptionally vile post (e.g. the post announcing attack) is legitimate or trolling.

Tuters on the other hand defines trolling through an inclusion of psychological effects that its practice incites in individuals: “Although trolling now more broadly refers to any number of ‘bad actors’ online, historically, it refers specifically to an antagonistic rhetorical practice which aims at eliciting emotional responses from unwitting or unwilling targets.”<sup>50</sup> Therefore, trolling brings another challenge for the analysts engaging in the fringe platforms’ examination and that is whether the individuals who post right- wing propaganda (among other popular propagandas) on the fringe forums are truly the proponents of such beliefs or not. It seems to be a rather common practice for individuals on these platforms to jump on a bandwagon, that is, to engage with the posts/ content that are not necessarily supportive of, however they do it due to certain satisfaction they get from people responding to their comment. Another outlook on this issue is that propaganda is not essentially illegal content and that disseminating it whether online or in real life is not considered a criminal activity in many

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<sup>49</sup> Cambridge Dictionary

<sup>50</sup> Tuters and Hagen, 2224

countries.<sup>51</sup> That is because most propaganda does not necessarily call for the violent means of support for the cause, but it is left to individual's subjective interpretation of the content to determine the course of action.

Another significant issue encountered by the intelligence units concerns the structural intricacies of fringe platforms. As previously mentioned, the way 4chan and 8chan function is that the boards/ threads are deleted after they reach a certain number of interactions which gives an uncontested freedom to users to post whatever they want, as they know that the posts will eventually be deleted. The posts are only archived if the users archive them themselves but if the threads are large, there is a danger of certain posts being lost as the thread moves to the server of the archive.<sup>52</sup> Navigating the archive is the issue itself, if one does not know what they are in fact looking for. This is where the unique language of these platforms comes into the play again. The terms used to refer to specific actions and objects for example, frequently change, as the new popular culture references come to life. In addition to looking in the archives for tracking material, one also has to take into consideration that not everything is contained on only one platform. As the cases of Tarrant and Earnest have demonstrated, right- wing extremists (and especially lone wolves) often navigate between and participate in threads on two or more fringe platforms simultaneously. Navigating these structural intricacies of the fringe platforms is thus a significantly time and resource- consuming activity.

Furthermore, lawmakers, researchers and intelligence units alike emphasize the issue of impressionable audiences on the fringe platforms like 4chan and 8chan. More specifically, they are concerned that the minors would especially be vulnerable to fringe platform extremist culture.<sup>53</sup> Their concern is primarily tied to the way in which popular culture references and video games are used to spread propaganda and encourage lone wolves. The UNDOC 2012

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<sup>51</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC), UNDOC Report: *The Use of Internet for Terrorist Purposes*, New York: UNDOC (2021): 3

<sup>52</sup> Tuters and Hagen, 2224

<sup>53</sup> UNDOC, 5

report has highlighted some of the tactics used by the terrorist organizations to target minors which is also applicable to fringe platforms used in radicalization of right- wing lone wolves: “Tactics employed by websites maintained by terrorist organizations or their affiliates to target minors have included mixing cartoons and children’s stories with messages promoting and glorifying acts of terrorism, such as suicide attacks.”<sup>54</sup> Considering that minors are often playing the video games which radical 4chan and 8chan users tend to reference in their posts, the concern of the intelligence agencies is that the minors thus may stumble upon propaganda while looking for video games’ tips and tricks.

Last but not least, tracking and censoring content on fringe platforms is often thought to be a limitation of freedom of speech.<sup>55</sup> Freedom of speech is one of the most important tenets of liberal democracy and one of the main distinctions between an autocratic rule and a democratic rule of law. To ensure the full freedom of speech and avoid having to collaborate with the authorities in the case of suspicious activities of its members (like terrorism or child pornography for example), fringe platforms often choose to host their sites on alternative non-Western servers. For example, before it was shut down and resurfaced as 8kin, 8chan was hosted in the Philippines, a country known for its lack of clearly defined cyber laws. The intelligence and counterterrorism units therefore could not shut it down even if they had legal ground to do so.

### **3.2 Strategies for prevention**

Intelligence units encounter a lot of challenges when attempting to trace and prevent (right- wing) lone wolf activities on fringe forums like 4chan and 8chan, however in the recent years there has been a significant movement towards identifying the best practices to lessen the threat of radicalization on these platforms. A United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>55</sup> Ozen Odag, Anne Leiser, Klaus Boehnke, “Reviewing the Role of Internet in Radicalization Process,” *Journal for Deradicalization* no. 21 (2019): 267, accessed on June 1, 2021, <http://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd>



(UNDOC) has revealed in its report as early as 2012 that: “Law enforcement, intelligence and other authorities are developing increasingly sophisticated tools to proactively prevent, detect and deter terrorist activity involving use of the Internet. The use of traditional investigative means, such as dedicated translation resources for the timely identification of potential terrorist threats, is also expanding.”<sup>56</sup> Considering the fast advances in technology from 2012 onwards, one can assume that the technological capabilities of intelligence units to track terrorist activity in the cyberspace has also significantly improved.

However, it is not just the technology that the intelligence agencies and those involved with curbing the radicalization process on fringe forums can employ for tracking purposes. The intricacies of fringe forums that represent the challenges to content and user tracing can also be repurposed for effective tracking and prevention of radicalization and the subsequent lone wolf terrorist attacks. Fringe platforms like 4chan and 8chan are community platforms of like-minded individuals which one can exploit by infiltrating on the boards and engaging with them. This practice would be the most helpful for intelligence gathering in a sense that once an undercover agent comes to be accepted as one of “them”, he or she learns of all the underlying communication processes and interactions that occur among the right-wing extremists on these forums. Even just joining for the purpose of learning the specific vocabulary could prove to be an asset as it would greatly facilitate navigation through posts as well as help in building a counterterrorist algorithm for detection of suspicious activity.

Lastly, these forums should also be used as an echo chamber for counternarratives by the intelligence organizations and lawmakers. The UNDOC report stated that: “Online discussions provide an opportunity to present opposing viewpoints or to engage in constructive debate, which may have the effect of discouraging potential supporters. Counter-narratives with a strong factual foundation may be conveyed through online discussion forums, images

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<sup>56</sup> UNDOC, 12

and video.”<sup>57</sup> Such an approach is based on the psychological warfare of fighting evil with its own means. Offering an alternative approach to resolution of an individual’s discontent and expressing empathy towards the political and social issues that might have prompted an individual’s radicalization are the means of strategic communication. Strategic communication can, in the long run, deter individuals on the level 3 of Moghaddam’s radicalization staircase (radicalization of opinion) to cross to the level 4 (radicalization of action) by providing them what they are lacking and desperately searching for in detrimental ideologies.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

Radicalization of (right- wing) lone wolves in the online arena might be a relatively new occurrence but it nevertheless represents a significant development in the wider field of terrorism. The lone wolf concept and its lack of hierarchical organizational structure found in terrorist groups demonstrates that the individuals need not be approached or coerced into committing terrorist attacks. However, the self- radicalization of lone wolves is rightly a debatable and paradoxical term in this context: right- wing lone wolves may self- radicalize by consuming the right- wing propaganda on their own but there is also a notable social aspect behind their radicalization, the one that reminds that they are never truly alone.

Right- wing oriented fringe forums such as 4chan and 8chan give lone wolves a particular feeling of belonging despite the communication among users often being in the form of ridicule and taunting. Fringe forums not only serve the propaganda in the most attractive ways, through references to popular culture, but their anonymous and fast- paced environment encourages and applauds the consummation of propaganda and voicing of discontent and aggressiveness. These platforms give birth to glorification practices used to canonize high- casualty perpetrators and inspire those with radical opinion to engage in the radical action by following in the footsteps of “successful” lone wolves. Fringe platforms are the most obscure corners of the Internet, those that lack moderation under the pretence of supposed freedom of speech. They facilitate the access to and create sources of highly violent propaganda content transnationally, without regards to international cyber laws. Fringe forums are social media and static extremist websites in one: they connect, inspire, radicalize, and canonize lone wolves in the online sphere.

The topic of lone wolves’ habitation and radicalization in the more obscure corners of the World Wide Web is notably understudied and glanced over. Several high profile right- wing terrorist attacks occurred in a very short span of time in 2019 demonstrating that there is

a certain recurring theme in regards to right- wing activities in recent years. With the turn to right- wing politics across the Western world, it is reasonable to expect that the world has unfortunately not seen it all from right- wing motivated lone wolves. Therefore, this research thus hopes to raise awareness of the phenomenon that is making its resurgence in the new millennium and offer the alternative framework for analysis of right- wing lone wolf modus operandi. Studying the patterns and intricacies characteristic for right- wing lone wolf terrorists can significantly improve the counterterrorism measures as well as break the chain of radicalization at its weakest identified point.

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