

Just a Click Away: Radicalization in the Net Generation

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Criminology

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Abstract

The use of the Internet as vehicle of socialization has exploded in the 21st century and while this presents exciting possibilities, it also comes with troubling ones. Among those who have embraced this new medium are extremist groups, who use the Web as a space in which to communicate, exchange ideas, network and reach new followers. In regards to this last point, it provides them near unlimited opportunities to gain access to potential recruits and converts, raising interesting questions in terms of the dynamics of the radicalization process and how it manifests itself within the confines of this new arena. Through an analysis of postings made to the discussion board of Stormfront.org, this research paper examines whether or not the radicalization process follows the same transformative pattern in the virtual world as has been described in some of the leading academic theories that address this phenomenon in the physical one.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the enormous contribution of many individuals, thus I would like to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the following people. First, to Professor Patrice Corriveau, my thesis supervisor, who has been a tremendous mentor; your constant support, encouragement and brilliant insights were priceless during this undertaking, along with your willingness to give my work priority when tight deadlines arose of my own making. It has truly been a pleasure and I feel extremely fortunate to have worked with you. Second, I would like to thank my co-supervisor Professor Jean-Francois Cauchie whose knowledge and guidance proved invaluable to me throughout this process, inspiring me to develop my work in ways I would not otherwise have done. Your input has had an enormously positive impact on my thesis. I would also like to thank my evaluators Professor Maritza Felices-Luna and Professor David Joubert for your incredibly insightful and exhaustive examination of this thesis. Your feedback and suggestions have made the final product a much stronger version than I could have ever achieved on my own. Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank Professor Fernando Acosta, who demystified the research and writing process of a thesis. Your instruction was an enormous aid and helped shape my work immeasurably.

A special thanks to my family to whom simple words can hardly do justice. Without your love, support and belief in me, I never would have had the courage to pursue this goal. To my mother Linda, who has assisted me in my academic career more times than I think either of us care to remember. You tirelessly helped with the editing process, giving freely of your precious time and knowledge, keeping me on track and focused through some extremely tough times in order to complete, what with your help, is a much better paper than I could have ever imagined. To my father Frank, who has always encouraged and inspired me to learn, explore and understand the world around me. Your support helped to motivate and enable me to continue on through moments when it seemed all too easy to quit or give up. To my children Franky and Olivia who were always there with hugs and

kisses when things became difficult. You never complained when Daddy was at the library every night and not free to play; you are the real driving force behind my pursuit of a higher education. Finally, to my wonderful wife Annie, who always believed in me, even when I did not believe in myself. You supported me through my entire schooling in every way possible, never uttering a negative word or complaint, only giving me encouragement. I could never have accomplished this without you and for that I will be forever grateful.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The popularity of the Internet has exploded in the last decade, providing a whole new form of socialization not seen before in human history. As people become more and more tech-savvy, cyberspace has replaced some of the traditional social environments of the past. Where once we gathered in public spaces, people now simply log on to engage in many of the same activities: “negotiate identity, gossip, support one another, jockey for status, collaborate, share information, flirt, joke, and goof off” (Boyd, 2010, p.81). No longer subject to the confines of geography individuals have access to instant communication—public and private—via the information superhighway.

Studies indicate that people today do not differentiate, in any major way, between the real world and the virtual one (Livingstone & Brake, 2010; Kuss & Griffiths, 2011). The online environment is not considered a separate arena from the material world, simply another avenue through which to pursue traditional social activities such as forming and maintaining friendships or exploring various interests (Media Awareness Network, 2013). Furthermore, this trend of usage is continuing to grow, particularly among young people. One study found that 94 percent of Canadian students, between the fourth and the eleventh grade, reported having easy access to the Internet—either at school or at home—and that over 86 percent have a personal e-mail (Media Awareness Network, 2013, p.6). However, it is not necessarily the ability to network with friends that is the most powerful draw, but the capacity to gain access to content that is restricted (Media Awareness Network, 2005). This type of social freedom is unique to today’s world, and it presents

many possibilities with regard to the potential for people to become exposed to certain elements, groups and content that they would not otherwise have access to if not for the World Wide Web.

Increasingly, it is also becoming a medium for more insidious actors: namely, extremist organizations. In the past, the capacity of these groups to commit acts of violence or recruit new members was generally limited to their immediate environment, now however, they have access to the entire cyberspace community. The Internet, as a medium to operate and maintain, costs very little in terms of effort and resources. It has the potential to reach millions of parties, as it is not subject to the confines of geography, time or space, and can create networks of like-minded individuals who promote radical ideas and ideologies worldwide (Klein, 2009).

Weimann (2009) found that at the end of the 20th century, there were a total of twelve websites related to extremist ideologies being operated online. By 2003, this number jumped to about 2630 sites, and by the end of the first decade of the 21st century, that number exploded to over 6940 active websites (as cited in the Homeland Security Institute White paper, 2009, p. 2). Most of these groups are incredibly tech-savvy and have begun to specifically target potential recruits through a myriad of techniques from discussion boards, editorials, news updates and/or images of events—even games or cartoons (Weimann, 2009).

The threat is not just from some distant group in a foreign country; it can be found much closer to home. Domestic extremist organizations, such as those found within the far-

right spectrum, have become particularly adept at taking advantage of all the Internet has to offer and, as a result, there has been a virtual explosion of online activity (Brown, 2009). According to one of the most respected non-profit organizations geared towards researching and tracking hate groups, the Southern Poverty Law Center, the number of far-right extremist groups operating in North America jumped by nearly 66 percent between 2000 and 2010, now reaching totals of over 1000 organizations (Potok, 2011). In addition, not only has the number of these groups increased, but with the advent of social media sites and the relative ease with which individuals can access the online population, they have greater exposure and longer reach than ever before, with even less restraints. For Baumrin (2011, pp. 233–234), in approximately fifteen years, between 1995 and 2010, the number of sites focused on messages of far-right extremism rose from 50 to over 11,500: discussion boards, social networks and blogs directed toward everything from dispersing intolerance and educating individuals on methods of violence to active recruitment.

The most troubling aspect, however, is the notion that the Internet not only allows for much greater access to possible converts, but has the potential to mimic many of the conditions necessary for the radicalization of individuals to occur. Free from everyday norms and social controls, the Internet would seem to have the potential to play a central role in creating the necessary bonds and networks which may isolate individuals and normalize radical ideas. As members begin to form relationships with others in similar situations, or are actively targeted by recruiters, their acceptance of extremist ideologies may then progress inside these groups within the online environment.

Madden (2008) discovered that the Internet can “intensify a sense of identity,” through what is known as “group polarization,” in which members of a particular extremist organization propagate their own radicalization through continuous discourse (as cited in the Homeland Security Institute White paper, 2009, p. 6). In 2009, the very day after the inauguration of the first ever African-American president of the United States, Barack Obama, Keith Luke was arrested for the shooting deaths of two African-American immigrants and the wounding of a third. It was discovered that these attacks were only a small part of a larger campaign of murder directed at individuals of African, Latino and Jewish backgrounds. Luke was not found to have had any previous physical contact or affiliation with far-right extremist groups, instead, his main form of contact with their extremist ideologies was the enormous amount of time he spent surfing the Internet exploring racist websites and viewing racist videos on a white supremacist media-sharing site called Podblanc (SPLC, 2011, p. 34).

In the process of examining the literature on radicalization, it became apparent that the vast majority of academic inquiry is heavily geared towards the process of Islamic radicalization. This is understandable due to events which occurred at the beginning of the 21st century, namely September 11, 2001. However, it does leave a major gap in understanding how individuals who associate with other types of extremist groups, many of which pose as much, if not more, of a threat to national security, move through the radicalization process. In the United States, during the ten years after the attacks on the World Trade Centers, between 2002 and 2011 Islamic inspired terrorist acts resulted in

thirty-three fatalities (Kurzman, 2013, p. 1). While certainly a number worthy of concern, that number is dwarfed when compared to the 254 deaths that occurred as a result of the violence carried out by far-right extremist groups during the same period (Perliger, 2012, p. 100): a figure nearly eight times greater.

Therefore, I have elected to focus my research on the far-right extremist community, in particular a group who, based on the available research, are considered to be one of the most radical, unpredictable and violence-prone organizations: skinheads (ADL, 2012; Cotter, 2007; FBI, 2010; Mitrokhin, 2006; SPLC, 2012). While many leading academics focused their research on skinhead activities of the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s (Baron, 1997; Hamm, 1993; Simi, 2006; Wooden & Blazak, 2001), the potential threat from these kinds of far-right groups is still very much a concern (Arnold, 2010; Goodwin et al., 2012; Kundnanz, 2012; Perliger, 2012; Wilkinson, 2007).

The purposes of this study is to utilize leading theories outlined in this paper to analyze the statements found in online discussion forums to determine if, and how, the radicalization process manifests itself within the discourse. First, can stages of radicalization be identified in the structure of the language used by individuals online and how they construct their views? Second, do the identified stages of the process follow the same transformative pattern in the virtual world as hypothesized in the physical one: for example, do the stages take place in a relatively linear or concurrent fashion, through which the individual must progress, from start to finish, in order to become fully radicalized?

Before continuing, I believe it is important to address the notion of a 'process' when considering manifestations of radicalization within discourse; in this context it requires a more nuanced conceptualization. Instead of viewing radicalization as a series of steps or stages to be achieved then subsequently discarded, this process must be regarded as an accumulation of stages which create a base and support further radicalization. As we shall see within the analysis, elements of earlier stages of radicalization can be present in statements made which, on the whole, fall under the classification of later stages. This does not mean that that a process does not exist, it simply represents the reality of the human experience; something which is far from black and white.¹

One of the most desirable aspects of the online environment is that it allows individuals to present their ideal self: one which may not necessarily reflect their true self. Therefore, it is also crucial to highlight the fact that this examination is directed solely at identifying stages of radicalization represented within the language used by members, not whether the subjects chosen are themselves truly transforming in their real lives, which would be impossible to determine within the confines of this study's design.

My focal point will be the discussion forums on the website Stormfront.org, where I will analyze the discourse of selected members over a specified period of time. To make sense of the findings, and hopefully to gain a more complete understanding of the dynamics at play, I will be looking for elements of five different models of the radicalization

¹ It is essential to acknowledge as well that there is no way of determining where a subject may have been in terms of their level of radicalization when they decided to become members of Stormfront.org, thus another justification for conceptualizing the notion of 'process' in this way.

process in the postings selected. To ensure a certain level of reliability with my findings, avatars were chosen based on a pre-determined set of criteria: subjects were active members, had an adequate level of participation within the forums and had been associated with the group for an appropriate period of time. A total of 225 posts (seventy-five for each member), were used for analysis. I readily acknowledge that this sample size is extremely small and does not provide for a large enough data set to reach definitive conclusions. However, due to constraints in time and resources, the choice was made to proceed by presenting a very specific and limited snapshot of this subject in hopes of inspiring further, more expansive research in the future.

To collect the data, covert observation of the site was undertaken, taking the stance of complete observer, which entails an approach of non-participation to ensure the presence of the researcher in no way alters normally occurring interactions. Each avatar's postings were divided into three sections, representing different time periods of membership: twenty-five oldest posts, twenty-five posts from the middle range and twenty-five of the most recent posts. This way of sampling created a data set which reflected the notion that radicalization evolves over the course of time similar to how it is proposed in some of the theories outlined in this paper. Using those same theories to justify selections, the postings were then examined using the technique of content analysis. Statements which contained dialogue representative of descriptions found at various stages were isolated then used to compare if, and how, the radicalization process manifested itself within the language used by subjects in their online exchanges versus how they are

hypothesized to occur in the selected theories which primarily consider the transformation based on physical interactions between members.

This line of inquiry is important as it not only addresses the lack of academic research into right-wing radicalization, but also endeavours to improve our understanding of how the radicalization process functions in the new landscape of the virtual world. Without the Internet, many of the more extreme ideologies would be either unavailable or much more difficult to access than they are now. The seemingly endless leaps in the technology of communication provide unlimited and unfiltered information regarding all types of radical thoughts and beliefs. Thus to better understand how this new online environment affects individuals is a crucial question which must be answered, because in today's world, all the instruction or motivation needed to transform someone from curious or troubled individual to radical extremist is available at the click of a button.

2.0 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before examining different theories of the radicalization process, it is important to first look at far-right extremism and the types of groups that are associated with this movement in North America. The following section outlines the organizations which have historically held far-right philosophies, looking at their development, ideologies and present levels of influence. It will also explore what type of online presence these groups have and how they utilize the Internet to construct their identity and pursue their organizational goals. After a broad examination of several organizations, I will discuss the skinhead movement in particular, addressing questions regarding how to classify these groups and their chief motivations along with their own online presence and how they fit into the extremist landscape.

2.1 Defining Far-Right Extremism

As with many concepts in the social sciences, the far-right movement lacks a precise and universally accepted definition as to what group or ideology belongs under its banner. Far-right extremism manifests itself differently, with different core beliefs, depending on the country or political system in which it emerges (Perliger, 2012, p. 13). While we may be unable to definitively conceptualize the far-right, there does exist some elements that appear to be somewhat consistent through the majority these kinds of groups and organizations.

Arguably, one of the most common of these found among those who populate the far-right is that of nationalism (Perliger, 2012, p. 14). In this instance, nationalism

encompasses ideas that revolve around the notion that members of a chosen group should have a common ethnic origin, culture or set of racial characteristics and that this ethnically homogenises group should exist in a “homeland” (Perliger, 2012, p. 14). These ideas taken in the extreme manifest as racism, xenophobia and discrimination towards all those who do not meet these criteria, as well as those who may be of similar origins yet have more inclusive or multicultural leanings (Perliger, 2012, p. 16).

The far-right movement is not solely organized around racist ideologies but hold ideas of “tradition values” and a “strong state” in great importance (Perliger, 2012, p. 17). Many far-right groups take these concepts to the extreme in the name of returning to what they consider to be a more decent or moral way of life. However, it is important to note that these ideas are more present in movements or organizations with long histories of existence than they are in those that have emerged since the end of the 20th century such as skinheads (Perliger, 2012, p. 17).

Lastly, another common thread connecting the majority of these types of groups is that of anti-democratic or anti-system sentiments which comes as a result of the more exclusionary, ‘traditional’ values of the far-right versus the more open and progressive notions of the “liberal-democratic value system” (Perliger, 2012, p. 18) The far-right holds beliefs “designed to exclude minorities and foreigners” whereas liberal philosophies “emphasize civil rights, minority rights and the balance of power” (Perliger, 2012, p. 18).

2.2 History of Far-Right Extremism in America

To truly do a complete history of the far-right movement would be a major research paper in and of itself. Right-wing extremism has appeared in various forms throughout the world in numerous incarnations and at various times. In fact, entire volumes have been written on the varying groups, ideologies and developments (Blee & Creasap, 2010; Garner, 2012; McVeigh & Cunningham, 2012; Perliger, 2012; Sharpe, 2000; Sims, 1996; Stern, 1997). Still, to frame this research in a better context and allow for a more complete understanding of the data collected and analysis conducted, it is important to examine some of the major players that exist in the far-right movement. Because I selected Stormfront.org, a US-based website, as the platform in which to collect my data, I have elected to focus my exploration on groups and organizations originating in that particular country.

While I fully understand that any individual, worldwide, can access this site, Stormfront has other sites specific to different regions of the globe such as Stormfront Europe and Stormfront Russia (Stormfront.org, 2014). While Stormfront is considered a white supremacist/racist skinhead website, I will explore some of the other organizations within the far-right movement that hold white supremacist beliefs and discuss other aspects of their individual ideologies. While this review is far from exhaustive, I believe it addresses the most influential groups with regard to understanding far-right extremism on the American landscape.

The existence of the far-right in America has long been synonymous with the Ku Klux Klan; however, today there is a much greater diversity with regard to extremist groups and

organizations than many may think (McVeigh & Cunningham, 2012). The Militia or Patriot movement, the Christian Identity movement, neo-Nazi movement and skinheads have all emerged as major players within the spectrum of American far-right extremism (Perliger, 2012, p. 19). In the following section, I will briefly explore the origins and ideological tenets of each of these groups.

2.2.1 Ku Klux Klan

Arguably the most recognizable far-right movement in the history of North America, the Ku Klux Klan, has a long and sorted history. Throughout the nearly 150 years of its existence, its power, influence and membership has greatly ebbed and flowed, from boasting half a million followers to being completely disbanded (McVeigh & Cunningham, 2012). Originally formed in 1865, the main objective of the Klan was to combat social and political changes that its members felt were being imposed on the southern United States at the end of the American Civil War (Sims, 1996). In particular, the Klan were adamant about maintaining the relationship which existed at the time between the white majority and the African-American minority, but their methods met with little success and the group was dissolved shortly thereafter in 1869 (Sims, 1996).

However the Klan would see a resurgence in 1915 as far-right ideologies in Europe began to take hold and seep across the Atlantic into the hearts and minds of some in North America, particularly, the southern United States (McVeigh & Cunningham, 2012). This incarnation of the Klan was presented as a much less radical version than in the past, more akin to a social club than to an extremist group. This new embodiment succeeded in

garnering significant support from not only working-class Southerners, but some relatively middle and upper class individuals as well (McVeigh & Cunningham, 2012). It is important to note that though this new and improved Klan may have had an outward image that was more palatable to the average person, core members of the group still remained committed to the original mission: an ideology espousing a “white supremacist, racist, anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic rhetoric” (Perliger, 2012, p. 22).

After the World War II, the Ku Klux Klan would see another period of diminishment as the horrors wrought by the Nazis and their own anti-Semitic and racist ideologies were still raw in the hearts and minds of most Americans. It was not until the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s that the Klan would once again re-emerge as a force to be reckoned with. This Klan was no longer its former ‘family friendly’ version, but now returned to its roots as a violent extremist group committed to maintaining the superiority of the Aryan race within American society by any and all means (Perliger, 2012). But this approach would, in the end, hurt them, as it attracted the attention of the authorities who began to make a closer and more serious examination of the Klan. This, combined with the failure of the organization to make any significant and lasting advancement in maintaining segregation and thwarting the Civil Rights Movement led to another rapid decline in support and saw the group once again implode by the late 1960s (McVeigh & Cunningham, 2012).

While a few notable figures appeared within the Klan structure in the last decades of the 20th century and the organization itself has survived into the 21st, the group as a

whole remains a shadow of its former self. Individuals who may have in the past become members now find themselves associated with other, more extreme and potentially more violent groups, groups who, arguably, have spawned from both the foundations and failures of the Ku Klux Klan.

2.2.2 Militia and Patriot Movements

While their ideologies may be rooted in historical concepts, the present Militia and Patriot movements have only been in existence for a relatively brief period of time. Even though they are not entirely new to the far-right landscape, most agree that they achieved the height of their power in the 1990s (Perliger, 2012, p. 28). Within this brief interval, they have been guilty of both plotting to commit and actually carrying out extreme acts of violence based on their beliefs (SPLC, 2011). While not specifically associated with white supremacy—there have even been African-American leaders such as J. J. Johnson of Ohio and Leroy Crenshaw of Massachusetts—they generally hold very extreme views regarding race and ethnic purity. However, the main tenets of their ideologies revolve primarily around anti-government or anti-federalist sentiments and a belief that the government holds far too much power and it is their duty as “citizens” to take back said power and return it to the people (Stern, 1997).

When considering motivations, there are three main scenarios used by these groups to justify their anti-government ideologies. First is their adherence to the idea of conspiracies and the fascination with plots of world domination by shadow figures and super-secret, all-powerful organizations (ADL, 2014) For example, many members believe

that the United States is slowly being taken over by “external forces interested in promoting a New World Order” where the sovereignty of the US will not only be compromised but the country itself will eventually be absorbed into some form of world government and lose all autonomy (Perliger, 2012, p. 28). Second is the view that the government is corrupt beyond repair, run by tyrants and only concerned with violating and suppressing individual rights and liberties (Stern, 1997). They see America as a police state and refuse to acknowledge its legitimacy, instead declaring themselves ‘sovereign’ citizens within the United States and not bound to its laws or responsibilities of citizenship (Stern, 1997). They cite increased gun control, environmental regulations, free trade and immigration issues as examples of infringement on individual rights and overbearing government control (Perliger, 2012, p. 30).

The third pillar of the movement is the notion of civilian activism, albeit, taken to the extreme. These groups justify their actions and beliefs as a form of patriotism, frequently citing concepts of the citizen soldier which are outlined by the founding fathers (Perliger, 2012). Under this guise, members consider themselves ‘true patriots’ and ‘heroes’ engaged in a fight to restore the country to what it was intended to be with in terms of its “identity, values and way of life” (Perliger, 2012, p. 31). The Militia and Patriot movements however have fallen on hard times as of late and have become less of a force within the far-right extremist spectrum in the 21st century. Still, due to the often violent and radical nature of many of its followers, they, to this day, remain a point of concern (ADL, 2014).

2.2.3 Christian Identity Movement

As the name suggests, the Christian Identity movement is highly religious in nature, espousing a unique brand of Christian Fundamentalism which it combines with a very extreme form of white supremacy (Perliger, 2012). The core ideological beliefs of the movement can be traced to England in the mid-1800s and to an individual named John Wilson, who promoted the idea that the lost Israeli tribes spoken of in the Bible did in fact migrate and establish themselves in northern Europe (Perliger, 2012). Identity members distort passages of the Bible to justify their ideologies as the 'word of God' and to promote notions of racial superiority by interpreting certain texts to mean that Anglo-Saxons are the so-called 'chosen people' (Perliger, 2012).

Christian Identity is based on three broad ideological pillars, the first of which is the distorted interpretation of the Bible. They believe that non-whites have a distinctly different origin than whites, and that Adam and Eve were the first 'white' humans and that all those of other ethnic origins originated from a time before them, and are descendent from a 'lower species' (Sharpe, 2000, p. 610). In addition, adherents of the movement also believe the Bible prophesies an inevitable holy war, where the battle lines will be drawn according to race, with "white, Anglo-Saxons" on the side of right, versus the "Children of Satan (Jews) and the mud-people (non-whites)" (Perliger, 2012, p. 31).

Second is that of racial superiority; Identity followers believe that whites are not only destined to be the dominant race on the planet but also "charged with a divine duty to conquer, dominate and colonize the Earth" (Perliger, 2012, p. 32). Believers support the

idea of the superiority of the Aryan race and strongly promote ideas of segregation and nationalistic practices (Perliger, 2012). As with many other white supremacist groups, violence or cruelty directed at those of other cultural or ethnic backgrounds is accepted since those individuals are not considered 'real' people (Sharpe, 2000, p. 614).

Finally, the Christian Identity movement has a distinct anti-government component and much like the Militia or Patriot movements, many members believe strongly in conspiracy theories. This component has two elements: the first is the belief that there exists a worldwide conspiracy directed at the global extermination of the Aryan race led by the Jewish people and others within the federal government and the second is the need to re-establish 'white' dominance over the world by any and all means necessary. This requires the overthrow of all government along with either the withdrawal or destruction of all international organizations (Sharpe, 2000, p. 609).

The Christian Identity movement remains a group of great concern within the United States. There has been a religious resurgence in mainstream America at the dawn of the 21st century and, as a result, a growth in religious fundamentalism has followed. This Christian Identity movement represents a form of religious extremism of the most dangerous kind; members become tremendously entrenched within their groups and can call on the 'will of God' as justification for violent acts in pursuit of organizational objectives.

2.2.4 Neo-Nazis

Groups with ideologies similar to Nazism were in existence in North America at the turn of the 20th century however, it was only during the late 1930s that Nazi groups reached any significant strength (Perliger, 2012). During this time period, there were numerous groups, but as a movement, they were fractured and unorganized, despite having a common set of ideologies centered on themes of racism and hate. With the fall of the Third Reich and the end of the World War II, Nazism in America seemed to all but disappear and was destined for the trash heap of American history. Then, in 1959, the American Nazi Party was formed. World War II combat veteran, George Lincoln Rockwell, emerged as its figurehead and became infamous as he publicly vilified Jews, praised Adolf Hitler and introduced a new generation of Americans to Nazi theories of racial purity and biological determinism (Perliger, 2012).

Rockwell would not see his dream of an American Fourth Reich to fruition; he was assassinated by one of his own followers and during his lifetime, the American Nazi Party was a complete and total failure in terms of power and support. It did, however, lay important groundwork in the form of ideas that would allow for Nazism to succeed to a certain degree within the unique American context (Perliger, 2012). This was the result of three main concepts established by Rockwell, which morphed Nazi ideology into a form that was better suited to the American experience.

The first of these was a re-defining of the so-called 'white race.' In contrast to the Aryan ideal promoted by Hitler, the American Nazi Party broadened their acceptance of

those they considered to be racially pure, including individuals from Eastern and Southern European descent or heritage (Simonelli, 1999). Essentially, Rockwell considered all those who were not of African or Jewish descent as white (Simonelli, 1999). The second concept brought forth for this new Americanized Nazism was to diminish and outright deny the Holocaust. Rockwell believed that this horrific event would be an extremely strong hindrance to recruitment should people view genocide as the culmination of a Nazi political system. Therefore, one of the chief tenets of the movement became the denial of the Holocaust, framing it instead as a ploy perpetrated by the Jews to illicit sympathy and political or economic advantages (Simonelli, 1999).

Finally, the introduction of religion to the American Nazi party was viewed by Rockwell as a crucial element to the success of the movement. He recognized that most Americans had strong religious leanings and looked for justifications and reinforcement for their actions, political or otherwise, from the church (Simonelli, 1999). This would have far-reaching ramifications with regard to far-right extremism in America; Rockwell would set about to infiltrate a then little-known Christian group called the Christian Identity movement which would not only survive his death and the fall American Nazi Party, but would one day be considered one of the most extreme and dangerous far-right groups in existence (Simonelli, 1999).

Presently, the neo-Nazi movement remains confused and chaotic, relegated to the fringes of not only society but far-right extremist lexicon as well. While having laid the groundwork for other groups, they have been unable to establish any type of substantial or

influential presence. Yet, it must be noted that the neo-Nazi ideology has not only survived, but thrived, in the form of other groups such as the previously mentioned Christian Identity movement and among the next group I will discuss: skinheads.

2.2.5 Skinheads

Skinheads enter the American white supremacist scene in the early 1980s having emigrated from the United Kingdom, where they emerged during the late 1960s as a young, white, working-class movement in reaction to deteriorating economic conditions and the “social marginalization” of their blue-collar neighbourhoods (Perliger, 2012, p. 25). As a group, they became fiercely territorial and aggressive towards outsiders, adopting a strong neighbourhood identity and violent behaviour (Perliger, 2012, p. 25).

This close-knit, community focused approach slowly began to morph into a white supremacist ideology, becoming more concrete in the 1970s and into the early 1980s. Skinhead groups began to venture out of their territories and began directing their violence towards specific groups such as “immigrants, homosexuals and hippies” (Perliger, 2012, pp. 25-26). This shift owes itself to two separate developments: first, the adoption of “references to Nazi heritage, symbols and memorabilia” within the skinhead subculture, originating primarily from the punk-rock scene as symbols of anti-establishment and second, the new association which developed between skinheads and other more established white nationalist organizations (Perliger, 2012, p. 26).

Skinheads in the United States held many of the same beliefs as their British counterparts, but there were some distinctions as the earliest groups to form also saw themselves as an Aryan youth movement who were anti-capitalist and anti-communist and a response to all they viewed as threats to the status of the white race (Perliger, 2012, p. 26). While initially white supremacy had only a minor influence on the American skinhead—even some non-racist skinhead groups appeared which were comprised of African-Americans or Hispanics—by the late 1980s a split occurred within the movement (Hamm, 1993). During this period, some skinhead groups began to focus more on white supremacy, embracing more extreme behaviours, becoming involved in numerous acts of hate-inspired violence as well as forging closer relationships with more traditional white power groups such as the neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan (Perliger, 2012, p. 48). Their violence would expand further as this shift occurred, to not only be directed towards those who did not fit into their racial standards, but to anyone who was of what they deem an unacceptable background, be it ethnic, cultural, religious or of the wrong sexual orientation (Hamm, 1993).

Skinheads definitely occupy a difficult area with regard to the conceptualization of the movement: some regard them as a deviant subculture with little or no concrete philosophies and others see them as hard-core, motivated far-right extremists. In the next section, I will discuss some of the prevailing theories within the academic literature on how to define skinheads as a group.

2.3 Skinheads: Deviant Groups or Far-Right Extremists

It is a matter of some debate among researchers whether or not to consider skinheads in the same definitional framework as other extremist groups. Many challenge the conceptualization of skinheads as a product of the far-right movement and instead argue that, in fact, the vast majority of skinhead gangs meet most, if not all, of the common criteria associated with traditional counterculture youth groups.

Baron (1997), in his examination of Canadian racist skinheads, found that when it comes to skinheads, they are far from organized or politically aware. His data showed that the majority of their daily activities revolved around pursuing needs of basic survival, as opposed to an ideological agenda. These included obtaining money for food, drugs and shelter—by both legal and non-legal means (Baron, 1997). In addition, any acts of violence appeared to be the result of similar reasons generally associated with other street gangs: the frustrations of poverty, the code of the street, violent backgrounds, and the need to establish reputations (Baron, 1997, p. 145). Baron discovered that, by and large, the majority of the acts of violence perpetrated, either by the individual or the group, were not racially motivated. In terms of political consciousness, his data revealed a fragmented group having no one coherent ideological framework.

Simi (2006) came to similar conclusions while compiling the data for his study on skinhead gangs in Southern California. What Simi found was that skinhead gangs were not highly politicized or organized, in fact, quite the opposite. They lived on the street or in other transient circumstances with no fixed address, spending a great deal of time loitering

or congregating for simply social purposes (Simi, 2006, p. 145). Furthermore, the bulk of their criminal activities were of a non-racist nature: addressing basic survival needs through theft or engaging in illegal substance abuse in the form of alcohol or drugs. Additionally, any participation in violent acts generally revolved around situations such as confrontations with other youth groups to settle disputes of territory, not hate crimes (Simi, 2006). While members did hold racist views, they existed in varying degrees without any clear or defined ideology for the group as a whole. Simi (2006) also notes that organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan are comprised primarily of adults whose main purpose, as members of said group, is the furtherance of racist aims. By contrast, he found that skinheads are generally of younger ages, reporting that most become involved in the lifestyle between the ages of twelve and nineteen, and that they pursue this choice more for the style, music, and socialization, as opposed to a political agenda (Simi, 2006, p. 146).

Other studies directly compared skinheads and more traditional extremist organizations with an objective to gain a better understanding of some of the factors that led individuals to join. Once again, their data suggested that skinheads have more in common with social groups than they do with terrorists. Studies by Wooden and Blazak (2001) indicated that some of the factors that led young people to join skinhead groups were the same as those that led minority youth to form street gangs. Individuals depicted their groups as being solutions to an environment where they felt fear, uncertainty about their place in the world and their future prospects, providing a sense of belonging and solidarity for its members (Wooden & Blazak, 2001).

Grennan's and Britz's (2006) research agreed with Wooden and Blazak. Grennan and Britz found that not only did so-called traditional gangs and skinhead gangs have similar reasons for forming and joining in groups, but that they had similar perspectives toward society in general, and their place within it. Their research showed that individuals tended to view institutional discrimination as the cause of their low socio-economic status. Also in common was a rejection of mainstream values, as members of both groups felt that there was little chance of improving one's life situation through the use of socially acceptable means (Grennan & Britz, 2006). Individuals from both types of youth formations also depicted their groups as being solutions to their situation, not problems. Their groups provided a sense of belonging and solidarity for members and not an ideological organization in which they could pursue a politically extremist agenda.

However, not all see skinheads in the same light. Researchers such as Hamm (1993) conducted a detailed study into the history of the skinhead movement to see if they could pinpoint how and why it emerged, and to put on paper some of the prevailing theories behind this subculture. According to Hamm's research, skinheads first emerged in British culture during the late 1960s to early 1970s (Hamm, 1993). Their style was based on two seemingly incompatible sources: the white working-class male and the black Jamaican immigrant (Hebdige, 1979). The result of the amalgamation of these two ways of life created a subculture that was "proletarian, puritanical, chauvinistic, clean-cut and aggressive" (Hamm, 1993, p. 24). Hamm (1993) argues that although skinhead gangs may have begun as youth groups, they are now closely organized around an ideological system

of white supremacy, and membership in skinhead groups is a result of deep-seeded racism. Skinhead groups for the most part now lack the traditional territorial claims of other gangs and they do not engage in for-profit criminal activity but only participate in acts of deviance connected to hate.

Wendy Hicks (2004) agrees with Hamm (1993) in her study of an American skinhead group known as Skinhead Nation. Hicks found that they were highly organized, that they shared common political viewpoints, and that they worked closely with other right-wing hate groups—such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Aryan Nation, and the neo-Nazi Party—on an international scale (Hicks, 2004). She discovered that the single most stated reason for joining the Skinhead Nation was to fight for the survival of the white race. Skinhead violence in America was once random and impulsive, but recently the violence has become more organized and planned. Based on her observations, Hicks found that unlike street gangs, skinheads do not spend significant time periods simply engaging in social pursuits. Instead, gatherings were for primarily for political purposes, and their group’s main focus and reason for the majority of their time they spent together, was for the purposes of planning or implementing racist delinquent activity (Hicks, 2004).

In an intelligence report produced by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2012), skinheads were described as “among the most dangerous radical-right threats facing law enforcement today” (SPLC, 2012, p. 1). The report looked at the evolution of the skinhead movement and how it evolved from a working-class subculture to adopt a more and more aggressive and radical ideology. The report attributes this transformation as a response to a

growing shift towards greater multiculturalism, asserting that “the skinhead movement is the most violent and ideologically crude form of this backlash” (SPLC, 2012, p. 3). In contrast to assertions made by other researchers that most skinhead groups lack any real devotion or adherence to any type of political or ideological views, investigators found that in several countries, skinhead organizations have structured relationships with “radical parties participating in electoral politics” (SPLC, 2012, p. 3). Furthermore, highlighted in the report is also the skinhead’s penchant for violence. Citing a country with one of the highest numbers of skinhead populations, Russia, the report states that “immigrants, students and even senior embassy staff from Asian and African nations have been the victims of assaults and murders on the streets of Moscow” (SPLC, 2012, p. 7). Again, this contradicts the notion that skinhead violence is not necessarily related to their radical ideologies.

John Cotter (2007) describes skinheads as “the most violent sub-group of a variety of contemporary right-wing extremist organizations” (Cotter, 2007, p. 111). In his research titled “Sounds of hate: White power rock and roll and the neo-Nazi skinhead subculture” Cotter (2007) looks at the development of the skinhead movement and its relationship with aggressive white power music. Cotter asserts that efforts to understand the true nature of the skinhead movement have been neglected by researchers and far from the movement disappearing, it has flourished in recent years, especially in several Eastern European countries (Cotter, 2007, p. 112). Based on Cotter’s (2007) study, estimates of the number of skinheads worldwide are approximately 70,000 and of those approximately 50 percent are considered “hard-core activists” (Cotter, 2007, p. 113). Furthermore, Cotter (2007) goes on

to cite experts in the field which label skinheads “terrorist youth subcultures” and “the most violent of all white supremacy groups” (Cotter, 2007, p. 112).

Nikolai Mitrokhin (2006) agrees with Cotter in his study looking at non-Islamic extremism in Russia arguing that skinheads are by far the largest and most dangerous far-right extremist movement facing his country today. Stating that “experts estimate the number of Russian skinheads alone at 50,000 people” (Mitrokhin, 2006, p. 20). The author describes the activities of skinheads to be both violent and ideologically motivated, running the gambit from coordinated attacks on specific ethnic groups to highly organized and violent mass demonstrations. Mitrokhin (2006) states that skinheads have spread to most major urban centers of Russia and are such a powerful force that even embassies of foreign countries have pressed the government to combat this far-right extremist group and protect their citizens from violence.

Based on the above research, it is clear that, by and large, today’s skinheads appear to be more akin to other extremist groups than simply a counterculture movement. When skinheads first appeared on the scene, their ideology was directed at maintaining the status quo of the demographics of neighbourhoods in which these young, white individuals found themselves in, however that goal has changed. Despite all indications to the contrary, the perception among most skinheads today is that they are now in the minority, no longer the majority. This view is a crucial element to explain why someone would become interested in or embrace extremist ideologies as many skinheads have done. Based on this new perspective, their prevailing goal has shifted from one which was sought to ensure ethnic

purity of their communities to now become an all-out battle for the protection and very survival of the white race. Thus, while they may have had their roots in a specific subculture based on style and music, the skinhead of the 21st century has moved far away from its original manifestation to a much more radical and potentially dangerous version.

2.4 The Mechanics of Online Radicalization

On August 5, 2012, Wade Michael Page arrived at a Sikh temple in Wisconsin and, armed with a semi-automatic firearm, opened fire on worshippers killing six and injuring four others, including a police officer (Heim, 2012). Page was very involved in the neo-Nazi and white supremacist scene, both as a member of several white power rock groups which toured the country participating in various white power events, and as a frequent participant in online discussion forums and chat rooms connected to the movement (Heim, 2012). While it is impossible to gauge how much his time spent online fuelled his extremist ideas, there is little doubt that it allowed him to feel connected and involved with a community of like-minded individuals who, in turn, reinforced and normalized his violent and extremist views.

On April 19, 2002, Ian Andrew Bishop, killed his older brother by bludgeoning him to death with a claw hammer. His motivation: he thought his brother was gay (Beirich, 2014, p. 2). Bishop was an extremely active member of several notable white supremacist and skinhead websites and he frequently downloaded and disseminated racist and homophobic materials found online as well as espousing his own extremist views to any and all who would listen (Beirich, 2014, p. 2).

In November, 2011, Frederick Thomas, Samuel Crump, Dan Roberts and Ray Adams were taken into custody as a result of their planning of a campaign of murder and mayhem in Georgia (SPLC, 2012, p. 45). The men's plans to carry out bombings of federal buildings, the killings of law enforcement officials and even chemical attacks on various major cities using ricin were inspired by online writings from well-known far-right extremist Mike Vanderboegh (SPLC, 2012, p. 45).

In July, 2011, Anders Breivik was responsible for bombing several government buildings in Oslo, Sweden, which claimed the lives of eight people (Pantucci, 2011). Yet this was not his primary objective; instead, it was to create a distraction which would enable him to carry out the next phase of his plan. Dressed as a police officer and armed with several firearms, he boarded a ferry to the island of Utoya where he ultimately killed another sixty-nine people, the majority of which were adolescents (Pantucci, 2011). Breivik had a strong online presence in many nationalist, anti-Islamic and white supremacist websites, posted videos of his ideologies to YouTube and electronically sent his manifesto to more than a thousand recipients a mere ninety minutes before his explosives detonated (Pantucci, 2011).

These cases are mentioned simply to illustrate that many individuals who have engaged in violent far-right extremist acts during the age of the Internet tend to have a strong presence in the online universe and participate heavily within their chosen virtual networks. While it is unlikely that one particular method of online activity or content would result in an individual becoming fully radicalized, that is to say, travelling through the entire

process and achieving a state of complete acceptance and obedience of extremist ideologies, many recent well-known cases involving members of the far-right movement demonstrate that individuals who achieved full radicalization has an exceptionally strong online presence (Beirich, 2014; Heim, 2012; Pantucci, 2011; SPLC, 2012). Furthermore, most experts agree that it is the emersion in extremist material and interactions over extended periods of time that can result in a transformation towards accepting ideologies and belief systems that support the use of violence and other extreme methods (Borum, 2003; Moghaddam, 2005; Sageman, 2008; Silber & Bhatt, 2007; Wiktorowicz, 2004). In terms of the World Wide Web, there is a constant barrage of information in the form of videos, graphic images and/or other types of media that is unique to the online experience.

Pyszczynski et al. (2006), in “Mortality Saliency, Martyrdom and Military Might: The Great Satan Versus the Axis of Evil,” looks at the effect the online environment has on the creation of radicals. They argue that this unrelenting exposure to media, which glorifies such acts as suicide attacks and beheadings, coupled with a continuous dialogue regarding the need for violent action can aid in garnering support for these actions, in what the authors term morality saliency (Pyszczynski et al., 2006). This is addressed by Peter Neumann, et al. (2012, pp. 17–18), in “Countering Online Radicalization in America,” and described as an “overpowering sense of one’s own mortality” which, in turn, leads a subject to see violent attacks such as bombings that claim innocent lives, as completely justifiable. Both studies believe the unique intensity and emotional response elicited by online

materials (videos, sermons or images), which generally give very one-sided views and are not subject to any form of peer review or challenge, are key to the transformation process.

These materials can obviously lead to a sense of indignation and rage at perceived injustices and prompt action. This notion is heavily supported by Sageman (2008), which I will discuss in greater detail in coming sections. Sageman (2008) is also relevant here as he has much to add to the particular attributes of the online radicalization process. He sees online radicalization as unique in that the social environment that individuals are exposed to online is a phenomenon that does not occur anywhere else. The dynamics which take place between members of a forum for example, intensify the radicalization process due to the very fact that most members are both connected to a group of extreme individuals, and at the same time, are in relative isolation, a situation also articulated by Weimann (2009).

Additionally, there is the sense of anonymity which is one of the defining characteristics of the World Wide Web; it provides a platform where individuals feel they can take on false or secret identities and thereby avoid any penalties for their actions. In “The Online Disinhibition Effect,” researcher Suler (2004) discovered that not only does the Internet provide a sense of concealment and secrecy, but these elements also lead to groups and individuals becoming more aggressive and zealous. This in turn can cause the rhetoric to become action.

Brachman and Levine (2011) go one step further in their paper “You Too Can Be Awalki!” In their research on Anwar al-Awlaki, who was connected to two cases of terrorist acts and believed to be involved in some capacity to several others, is a major producer of

online extremist content. Not long ago, al-Awlaki's sermons, where he preached violent acts towards the West, had been accessible through numerous mainstream Islamic websites. They found that the gap which exists between the online self and the actual self, causes, for some, a sense of despair and pain. Once the discrepancy between the two is acknowledged by the individual (specifically their commitment to whichever cause), some will begin to take measures in order to close the gap and become as committed in real life as they are in their virtual one.

Of course we must not forget the inherent nature of the Internet: a platform which provides the opportunity for individuals and/or groups to create connections and networks of similar people without any restrictions in time or space. Today, the ease with which these connections to violent extremist groups can be made is truly frightening. Now, for these organizations, recruitment is far less dangerous and the potential pool of candidates is much more immense. While there still exists some debate regarding the strength of the impact the Internet has on radicalization, the fact remains that it does play a part and has become a tool which radicals are adept at making use of. In the following section I will discuss some of the ways in which extremists utilize the Internet as a platform to engage in discourse, reinforce ideas and network with other likeminded individuals: the very ingredients necessary for violent radicalization.

2.5 The Internet as a Tool for Extremists

With the Information Age came a revolution in global communication where the Internet features as one of today's most important elements. It has reduced the cost of

communication, making it virtually free of charge and no longer confined by physical space. The exchange and dissemination of information is essentially uninhibited. The Internet has also begun to form a vast portion of the world's combined knowledge into an organized and searchable entity, providing anyone with an Internet connection unrestricted access. Individuals and groups are no longer confined to a specific geographic area but can now connect with virtually anyone anywhere on the globe and, most significant with regard to this study, the Internet has removed much of the fear and hesitation of participating in risky, embarrassing or illegal behaviour as the ability to conceal one's identity or remain anonymous online is quite easy (ADL, 2002).

Thus, it is hardly surprising to most to find out that far-right extremists were among the first types of radical groups to make use of the Internet in this fashion (Neumann, 2012). The Internet became a superb tool to have available when your goal is to demonstrate, promote or attempt to bolster a particular message or agenda and create networks with supporters and actors who share a particular set of beliefs (Thomas, 2009). Material could be posted which is not subject to any filtering, censorship or independent review; therefore, potential recruits are exposed to very one-sided, visually compelling media which reinforces and legitimizes radical ideologies or claims (Thomas, 2009).

The Internet also allowed individuals to integrate more easily into groups that would normally be too high-risk and enable them to move past small isolated groups and gain access to more dedicated members, sometimes even those in leadership positions (HSI, 2009). Furthermore, through the relative safety of online networking, an environment

emerges which not only normalizes behaviour and points of view that would otherwise be deemed unacceptable, but becomes an instrument of reinforcement as these networks are made up of others with similarly radical viewpoints (RCMP, 2011).

In 1983, the first neo-Nazi “computerized bulletin board system” was launched online with the objective of connecting far-right supporters and activists, regardless of geography (Levin, 2002, p. 960). Less than a year later, one of the leading far-right extremist voices of the time, Louis Beam, created a similar site for his organization Aryan Nations (Neumann, 2012). While it appears that Beam was less interested in radicalization than in creating what we now consider a social network, the very fact that so many believers were now connected through an unfiltered online environment changed the dynamics of the movement.

The Anti-Defamation League commissioned a report not long after, published in 1985, which found that the vast majority of participants were not in fact present members of the far-right movement, but were instead young impressionable individuals particularly susceptible to propaganda (Lowe, 1985, p. 5). Another significant finding of the report was the effect this new online social network had on participants. They found evidence that suggested the linking “together of hate group activists coincides with an escalation of serious talk ... about the necessity of committing acts of terror” (Lowe, 1985, p. 5). Beam saw clearly the potential of the World Wide Web to create arenas and virtual meeting places to disseminate information, spread ideologies and incite others to violent action.

As early as 1992, Beam began making calls for leaderless resistance and for small groups or individuals to act on their own, without any structured orders from higher-ups, to network, connect and learn from others in the online community via available Internet technologies (Neumann, 2012, p. 15). While these technologies did not yet provide real-time interaction in the form of discussion groups or chat rooms, they were an important tool to distribute news, ideological texts that may have been difficult for the average believer to obtain and/or other relevant information and announcements (HSI, 2009).

Even given the benefits of these types of sites, it was not long before extremist groups found new, more interactive tools. Online forums and chat rooms which now provided instant interaction among members began to emerge. They allowed for exchange and debate of even the most radical ideas without fear of reprisal from the authorities. As it has in most sectors of society, the technology improved, and as a result, allowed for another leap in how extremist groups use the Web. Until the beginning of the 21st century, most communication on discussion boards or forums was generally “text-based” due to the simple fact that “Internet bandwidth and most people’s dial-up connection could not cope with or support large data downloads” (Neumann , 2012, p. 17).

That was soon to change, however, and the use of audio and video became a powerful tool for extremists. Images and videos glorifying extremely brutal acts and violence were able to earn incredible amounts of online exposure and discussion for the individual groups which produced them (Kimmage, 2008). Finally, by the middle of the first decade of the new century, “social media, networking and user-generated content,”

otherwise known as Web 2.0, came into being and violent extremist organizations were quick to harness this new technology (Neumann, 2012, p. 17). Rather than being confined to the seedy and dark spaces of the online environment, they now became a part of the so-called mainstream online community. They wrote blogs, shared videos easily accessible to all, and created their own social networking sites (Kimmage, 2008). They were now found on places such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to name a few, ready and waiting for individuals to discover them.

What is significant about these developments is that this enabled these groups to exponentially expand their level of exposure and create a platform in which to disseminate information to a much greater range of individuals curious about their ideologies. With the new technologies provided by the Internet, extremists can now reach certain demographics of the population which they never before had easy access to or have been traditionally responsive to their agendas (Bermingham et al., 2009). The Internet now provides them the means in which to promote their agendas on a level that was simply impossible for such groups even a few short decades ago.

2.6 Skinheads on the World Wide Web

In a report commissioned by the Anti-Defamation League (2013), researchers looked at far-right extremist websites and highlighted three of the most prevalent aspects of skinhead websites functions and how they aided the group not only online, but offline as well. First, they found that the online environment allowed for “instant and anonymous access to propaganda that inspires and guides criminal activity” (ADL, 2013, p. 2). This occurs due to

the fact that the Internet gives users the ability to post messages, opinions or even incite violence while enabling them to remain completely anonymous and unaccountable for the consequences (ADL, 2013). Examples of this type of activity include instructional materials available via websites addressing everything from guerrilla war tactics, bomb making, weapons use and even publishing “hit lists” (ADL, 2013, p. 5).

In addition to anonymity, the Internet was found to provide the means to more easily and effectively network and organize group activities (ADL, 2013). Striking examples of this can be seen with regard to the coordination of major skinhead/white supremacists’ events and concerts that occur annually in the name of the movement. The Internet has been used to provide individuals with crucial information that enables them to attend these gatherings: methods of transportations, lodgings, locations of the events (which are often kept secret and available only at the last minute) and how to connect with local skinheads (ADL, 2013). Furthermore, websites have been essential in coordinating demonstrations and providing individuals up-to-date information and locations of protests or stand offs (ADL, 2013).

Finally, the ability to generate income was cited as an important activity undertaken by skinheads and other far-right extremist groups on the World Wide Web. They do so through the sale of merchandise, membership fees, and donations, and in particular with skinheads, music. This provides groups with the opportunity to develop a steady stream of income to support their organizations and operations (ADL, 2013). Furthermore, in terms of

skinheads, sales of music are directly linked with spreading their ideologies and recruiting new members and represent one of their most powerful propaganda tools (Cotter, 2007).

Gerstenfeld et al. (2003) looked at the make-up of far-right extremist sites, skinhead sites in particular, to determine what type of activities are to be found and what they say about the group's objectives with regard to their online presence. One of the key elements discovered on skinhead sites was the attempt to create an online community. Gerstenfeld et al. (2003) found that social interaction among members was the main focus of skinhead sites, providing members many different opportunities to communicate and connect. At a close second was recruitment of new members, specifically targeting young individuals, which can be seen with different online tools such as racist video games, music downloads and other types of multi-media content (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). Also present are more conventional items such as membership forms or signing up for mailing lists (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003).

Another common element is the capacity to link to other websites which promote similar ideologies and beliefs, allowing for a would-be extremist to easily connect with other far-right groups and potentially discover a series of more and more radical organizations as they make use of the links which connect to both national and international organizations (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003). Gerstenfeld et al. (2003) also argue that the ability to network in this fashion aides in building a much stronger sense of kinship among extremists as they see not only those of their immediate group, but a much greater society which include many different manifestations of the far-right movement. Finally,

another common theme was the marketing of the group itself in the form of merchandising and the promotion of events (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003).

Blazak's (2001) findings support Gerstenfeld et al. (2003) as his research found skinhead groups' online activities are geared more towards networking and ideas of shared community with an implicit focus on recruitment. They target individuals who seek companionship, reinforcement and protection. They were found to single out young people in particular and tailor to socially confused individuals who were seeking companionship and a sense of belonging (Blazak, 2001).

Finally, Arnold (2010) in his research titled "Visions of Hate: Explaining Neo-Nazi Violence in the Russian Federation" looked, in part, at websites attributed to several Russian skinhead groups to determine what kinds of activities they are participating in online. What he found was in line with other researchers: that these skinhead groups use the Internet for numerous reasons such recruitment and networking. In addition, however, Arnold (2010) also noted that it was a powerful vehicle to promote ideologies and spread extremist propaganda through blogs, articles and manifestos (Arnold, 2010).

Based on how the internet is used by skinheads and other far-right extremist groups, it hardly seems a stretch in logic to believe that the Internet can, and does, have an effect on an individual's formation and acceptance of extremist ideologies. Moreover, it may be particularly influential in legitimizing these beliefs as it allows for a formation of a community that can exist freely in the virtual world without the constraints or challengers it would most certainly be faced with in the real one.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Evil Intentions or Immaculate Radicalization

When attempting to examine how the stages of the radicalization process are expressed through exchanges in the online discourse it is imperative to examine the players involved as well as the dynamics, very unique to this environment. The organizations which utilize the World Wide Web can indeed be violently extreme: not only do many groups who are definitively connected to violent acts have an online presence, but violence is perpetrated online by numerous organizations as well. Far-right extremist groups have been linked with using the Internet for a number of violent and violence-promoting activities such as online stalking and harassment, which may include threats of physical harm, the publishing of 'kill lists' of the groups enemies and posting media of ideologically motivated violent attacks as both a method of inspiration to members and intimidation to victims (Fekete, 2012).

It is clear these organizations are not passive entities online; their websites can act as anything from a vehicle of propaganda, a virtual meeting place for members or a structured environment geared towards the radicalization of new recruits. Some groups even go so far as to use their sites to plan or coordinate acts of violence or finance the group and its operations (UN, 2012). Individuals who explore these sites and may become members, thus potentially travelling through the radicalization process as a result, are somewhat more complicated. While they are certainly not passive, as they must actively seek out these groups online, they are not all together conscious actors either. Extremist groups purposefully design websites, sometimes with the same level of sophistication as

top level marketing campaigns, to help facilitate the adoption of extremist philosophies within an individual who becomes interested in their organizations.

3.2 What Is Radicalization?

When looking at what role the Internet potentially plays in the adoption of violent extremist belief systems, it is first helpful to understand what exactly radicalization is. In the following chapter I will examine the concept of radicalization by exploring some of the leading theories on the subject. The first section will deal with radicalization on a more Macro level scale, addressing the social and economic conditions as well as other factors which create an environment where individuals and groups might adopt much more extreme ideas than they would under different circumstances. I will then discuss radicalization as a process by considering some of the leading theories that frame this transformation as an evolution from curious individual to someone who accepts, advocates and even utilizes violent action as a means to achieve, promote and further their ideologically driven objectives.

Essentially, radicalization is the process by which groups or individuals are exposed to messages or beliefs of an ideological, religious or political leaning that espouse extremist ideas or methods in pursuit of their objectives (Gartenstein-Ross & Grossman, 2009). This occurs over a period of time and in a step-by-step fashion. This is not to say that an individual cannot move back and forth through the process or even that several stages can occur simultaneously (Sageman, 2008), but it is important to note that the transformation is distinguished as being a series of stages and not the result of a single triggering event or

moment. Instead, to become fully radicalized, a subject transforms from someone who does not use or believe in the use of extreme measures in pursuit of their beliefs, to the individual who is not only able to condone violent acts, but may actively engage in them and consider them 'morally' acceptable and wholly justified.

The process is also distinguished by the need for interaction among those beginning or travelling through the radicalization process and those who are well entrenched or have already completed the journey. Presently, there is no evidence to suggest that anyone can simply become fully radicalized by watching videos or being exposed to other types of extreme materials. Instead, this requires a certain level of interaction and exchange between members of an organization who represent all levels of the radicalization spectrum. It is the reinforcement and normalization of radical or extreme ideologies among members that allow for individuals to progress through the process. This is what makes the Internet a unique platform for extremist groups: while there is yet to exist conclusive evidence to suggest that online activity by itself can result in radicalization, it does allow for a near limitless ability to create networks and connections among extremely vast populations.

While radical ideas are not necessarily negative in and of themselves, this way of thinking only becomes a problem when actors become so extreme in their ideologies that they begin to see acts of violence or terror as acceptable solutions to achieving their goals (Rabasa et al., 2010). Numerous attempts have been made to determine what, if any, root causes might exist that lead to radicalization, yet there is little agreement on a definitive

list. The literature suggests that everything from linguistic, religious or political beliefs to individual exclusion, threatened identity, discrimination, globalization and immigration, are all potential elements that might lead someone down an extremist path.

Wilnera and Duboulozb (2010), in their paper titled “Homegrown Terrorism and Transformative Learning: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Understanding Radicalization,” submit, based on their findings, that there is no one set path for an individual to take in order to radicalize. Those who, in the pursuit of their agendas, either conceive of using violence or actually do, are able to because they see it as a legitimate and valid tactic, however, “political violence is rarely constructed in a vacuum” (Wilnera & Duboulozb, 2010, p. 38). Thus, the authors argue that the radicalization process cannot be described as a set of universal steps, but instead, as an extremely personal progression, where “individuals adopt extreme political, social, and/or religious ideals and aspirations, and where the attainment of particular goals justifies the use of indiscriminate violence” (Wilnera & Duboulozb, 2010, p. 38).

Radicalization is both an intellectual and emotional transformation: the end goal is to desensitize a person to violent acts. Though the authors acknowledge that there is a wealth of growing literature attempting to develop a framework on the mechanics of the radicalization process, their work is focused on the precursors. Wilnera and Duboulozb (2010) shy away from developing a set of phases that lead from contemplation to violent acts, and instead, point to three factors which, in their minds, create the conditions to spur

transformation. These conditions are: socio-political alienation, deepening religious identity and anger over a state's foreign policy.

Socio-political alienation refers to a state in which individuals feel a lack of acceptance and integration within their society due to an inability to properly conform themselves to their new country/community. The theory, therefore, is that those persons who cannot assimilate are forced to search for groups in which they can achieve a sense of belonging and community. This causes them to detach from society at large and drastically narrow their social network, creating isolation (Wilnera & Duboulozb, 2010). Wilnera and Duboulozb (2010) do admit that while this notion does not address fully the process of radicalization, it does help to understand how the use of violence against citizens of the larger state can be justified.

By a particular individual or group disassociating themselves from society at large "politically, socially, and ideologically" and "eventually rejecting the national identity shared by other citizens, along with the collective's underlying political ideology, historical narrative, and related value-systems" violent radical behaviours can result (Wilnera & Duboulozb, 2010, p. 39). The radicalized individuals come to brand the society in which they live in as the enemy.

Yet again, as mentioned, the authors do not see this approach as one that explains why the radicalization process reaches its full zenith. While these conditions may indeed be precursors to extremism, they do not account for the fact that countless individuals feel social alienation and never act out in violent ways, or for that matter even *consider* doing

so. Wilnera and Duboulozb (2010) point to another factor that may help explain this gap and that is the notion of religiosity and globalization. It is important to note, that much like the vast majority of literature on the subject of radicalization, the authors are examining only Islamic Fundamentalists so that, for them, religion is a major factor in the radicalization process, however, as uncovered in previous sections with regard to the history of the far-right movement, Christianity was found to play a significant factor in shaping their extreme ideologies as well. It is under the cloak of legitimacy, which religion provides, where many violent radicals perceive themselves as soldiers of God and therefore justified in their brutality.

Wilnera and Duboulozb (2010) found that those who became extremists through more self-radicalization than direct and continuous contact with established terrorist groups, were far from experts in their particular religious ideology of choice. If religion, in and of itself, cannot fully explain radicalization, then another element is required and some research points towards that element being globalization. It is the idea that globalization creates an atmosphere which leads to both “confusion and insecurity over identity” and it is through radicalization that certain Muslims can feel as though they are “reasserting their religious identity” (Wilnera & Duboulozb, 2010, p. 41). However, Wilnera and Duboulozb (2010) do not see the forces of globalization as sufficient explanations for radicalization. They view globalization as necessary conditions, but remind us that these conditions are factors that affect many individuals, and again, the vast majority of whom never engage in violent extremist acts.

To fill the gap Wilnera and Duboulozb (2010) turn to the concept of reaction to foreign policy: how radicalization can be sparked by a reaction to a host country's policies and eventual rejection of said policies through violent means. Their argument is that acts of extremist violence can be motivated by what some view as wrongs committed against or threats to members of their chosen community worldwide. This, in turn, causes feelings of humiliation and anger to develop in certain people to the extreme, where they see violent action against the State and its citizens as a justifiable response to the problem (Wilnera & Duboulozb, 2010). But once more, we are left with the obvious problem of trying to explain why it is that only an exceptionally small percentage of the overall population who experience these feelings goes on to become radicalized. Though these precursors do represent important conditions for the process of radicalization to occur, to understand how it manifests itself within the online dialogue of specific actors, we must delve deeper into how the process works on a micro level and how the individual moves from passive observer to violent actor.

King and Taylor (2011), in their paper "The Radicalization of Homegrown Jihadists: A Review of Theoretical Models and Social Psychological Evidence," provide a thorough outline of five leading models which attempt to understand the radicalization process. The authors note that, while due to recent and past events the majority of studies focus on radicalization of Muslims, this progression is not unique to the Islamic faith. In fact, they state that radicalization "is not, by definition, specific to any particular national, political, religious, or ideological group" (King & Taylor, 2011, p. 603). They argue that radicalization

in today's context speaks more to homegrown extremists than those who choose to target a foreign state. Using their work as a guide for this study, below are the five models examined by King and Taylor (2011), which they obtained through an analysis of the prevailing theories and frameworks from both law enforcement agencies and academic research.

3.2.1 Borum's Pathway

King and Taylor (2011) begin with Borum's Pathway, a concept detailed by Borum (2003) in "Understanding the Terrorist Mindset," where four distinct stages of progression are outlined (Borum, 2003, pp. 7–10). According to Borum, the movement through each stage marks an ever-increasing transformation to a point where an individual formulates an ideology that justifies the use of violence and terror.

At the first stage, the "it's not right" stage, individuals come to see that their particular situation is no longer desirable, which can be the result of numerous reasons such as poverty or loss of liberty (Borum, 2003, p. 7). What emerges from this state of mind is the second stage, the "it's not fair" stage, which comes about as individuals now begin to make comparisons between themselves and others and as a result, resentment grows due to what they perceive as an injustice between their situation and that of those they believe are more favourable (Borum, 2003, p. 8). From this resentment, a scapegoat or responsible party will be identified for the perceived inequalities, representing the third stage, laying blame, the "it's your fault" stage (Borum, 2003, p. 8). Finally, the subject may progress to a fourth and final stage of "stereotyping and demonizing" the enemy, where a particular

group that has been blamed becomes vilified and dehumanized, and as a result, the use of violence against that group is seen as justifiable (Borum, 2003, p. 8).

3.2.2 Silber's and Bhatt's Homegrown Threat

Another model cited, developed by law enforcement, the NYPD's Radicalization Process, comes from the New York City Police Department (NYPD). Much like Borum's Pathway, it is comprised of four stages leading to radicalization. In their report for the Intelligence Division of the NYPD, titled "Radicalization in the West: The Homegrown Threat," Silber and Bhatt (2007) developed their four-stage model from studying five well-known terrorist cases in Western Europe and North America. The authors highlight some common attributes of individuals who are more likely to travel down the radicalization process, such as the environment where they live—such as very closed off, highly religious communities—and the make-up of the individual themselves in terms of ethnicity, gender and age (Silber & Bhatt, 2007, p. 24).

The first stage labelled "pre-radicalization" describes the state in which individuals find themselves before entering the radicalization process. This state is comprised of numerous factors such as "his or her pedigree, lifestyle, religion, social status, neighborhood, and education" (Silber & Bhatt, 2007, p. 24). The second stage, that of "self-identification," represents the moment when, influenced by both "internal and external factors" an individual begins to consider a shift away from his or her former persona towards one that is shaped by a more radical philosophy (Silber & Bhatt, 2007, p. 32). Thus, individuals may turn to ideologies and groups which act as a solution to the loss of control

or identity that they are feeling, providing easy answers for their present situation and allowing for a normalization of more extreme ideas. Motivators for this transformation can include economic, social, political or personal events such as the loss of employment, being a victim of discrimination, world affairs or the loss of a close relative (Silber & Bhatt, 2007, p. 32). The third stage is the “indoctrination” stage and here individuals have now completely accepted an extremist viewpoint and condones the use of violence against all those who do not share in their belief system (Silber & Bhatt, 2007, p. 38). At this point, individuals “re-define their direction in life” rejecting commonly held goals, such as family or achieving material success, and become focused instead on the goals of their chosen ideologies, and service to the “greater good” of their cause (Silber & Bhatt, 2007, p. 32). The final stage of “jihadization” is achieved when individuals commit themselves to violent action against their perceived enemies, viewing themselves as “holy warriors” and the group now becomes the most important set of relationships in their lives (Silber & Bhatt, 2007, p. 45).

3.2.3 Wiktorowicz’s Joining the Cause

On the more academic side of things, Quintan Wiktorowicz (2004) writes in his paper “Joining the Cause: Al-Muhajiroun and Radical Islam,” his own concept of the radicalization process. While Wiktorowicz stays away from the term *radicalization*, his model attempts to explain why someone would join a violent radical organization, in this case, an Islamic one. Wiktorowicz performed an ethnographic case study of members of an extremist Islamic movement based in the United Kingdom known as the Al-Muhajiroun: a group with the goal

of a global-wide Islamic revolution in states where Muslim populations exist, Britain included (Wiktorowicz, 2004). The first step in his process is what he terms “cognitive opening” which represents the moment when a person is much more receptive to radical beliefs and ideologies than he or she would normally have been due to a crisis of a personal nature which is unique to the individual (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 7). This crisis can be “economic (losing a job, blocked mobility), social/cultural (sense of cultural weakness, racism, humiliation), and political (repression, torture, political discrimination)” (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 8). This corresponds to Silber’s and Bhatt’s “self-identification” phase discussed in the previous section (Silber & Bhatt, 2007).

The second step in Wiktorowicz (2004) model is “religious seeking” where the receptiveness to more radical ideas of the first step is focussed on religious ideologies. An individual will begin to become more involved in religious study and seek guidance from others or from available sources such as “books, the Internet, and other independent avenues of learning” (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 9). Under the cloak of religion, the individual is likely to consider more slanted and extreme world views. While Wiktorowicz’s work revolves around Islamic radicals, this framework could easily be applied to the young white individual who is searching for identity and embraces an ethnic superiority model such as those supplied by hate groups or skinhead extremists which have generally entrenched their ideologies within a distorted understanding of Christianity.

The third step is one of “frame alignment” and it is here that a person amalgamates with those of the radical organization through continuous exchanges on theology, ideology

and the particular beliefs of the group. Because the individual in question generally lacks sufficient knowledge to properly discuss and understand the true merits of the radical views espoused by the group and its members, they will, for the most part, accept them as long as they adequately address the needs of the individual (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 9).

Finally, the fourth step is reached: “socialization and joining.” It is here that the person officially becomes a member of the group, fully accepts both the group’s ideology and identity and their commitment is sustained through association with other members and withdrawn from mainstream society (Wiktorowicz, 2004, p. 10). What is interesting, and also very relevant to my own study, is that Beutel (2007), in his work titled “Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism in Western Muslim Communities: Lessons Learned for America,” addresses Wiktorowicz’s theory and states that while real-time, face-to-face interactions are more powerful, these four steps, which represent the socialization of an extremist, have the potential to occur solely online through discussion forums and private chat rooms (Beutel, 2007, p. 6).

3.2.4 Moghaddam’s Staircase to Terrorism

Moghaddam’s (2005) paper titled “The Staircase to Terrorism: A Psychological Exploration” looks at the psychological progression that leads to terrorism, and in so doing, conceptualizes the process as an ever-narrowing staircase. He sees the radicalization process of separate stages, progressing only as a result of specific factors that will encourage a subject to continue further up the proverbial staircase.

According to Moghaddam's model, the staircase begins at the ground floor and it is here where an individual's perception of his or her condition in life is important, a state he terms "psychological interpretation of material conditions" (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 162). Again, these feelings are based on a perception and not necessarily rooted in reality or wholly objective. Due to factors such as unfavorable economic, social or political conditions, a sense of unfairness or injustice at their present state may develop and lead them to will look for solutions to their present situations, and their actions will be dependent upon the options available to them. This represents the first step, that of "perceived options to fight unfair treatment" (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 163). For Moghaddam (2005, p. 164), these options fall under two distinct categories: social mobility and procedural justice. If individuals have the capacity to change their situation through legitimate means or if they perceive the pillars of society, such as the legal system, democratic process or other essential institutions, to be unbiased and fair and feel they truly have a voice within their society, they are far less likely to continue their progression up the staircase toward more radical behaviour (Moghaddam, 2005).

However, if this is not the case, and the individual feels no avenues or legitimate methods of redress exists, they develop a sense of discontent which may lead to the next step, "displacement of aggression" (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 164). This is where the sense of discontentment is now directed at a specific target and individuals may begin considering extreme possibilities, or options, against those they believe responsible for their predicament (Moghaddam, 2005). If the progression up the staircase continues, individuals

will find themselves on the third step, “moral engagement,” where the individual in question is pressured to shift his or her thinking from the traditional morals of society to embracing that of the radical organization. This is achieved by the group through several important tactics such as “isolation, affiliation, secrecy, and fear” (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 165).

Should things continue to advance, the fourth step, “solidification of categorical thinking and the perceived legitimacy of the terrorist organization” represents the moment when individuals enter into the secretive world of the radical group so deeply that they are not likely to ever be let out and live (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 165). This immersion into the group serves to expose the subject to one-sided views which legitimize, justify and glorify the use of violence and terror, fostering a deeper sense of belonging and commitment to the groups and its goals, further radicalizing the individual (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 166).

The final step on the radicalization staircase, labelled “the terrorist act and sidestepping inhibitory mechanisms” is reached when individuals wholly accept the battle lines drawn by radical organization through two distinct processes: social categorization and psychological distance (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 166). Through social categorization, targets such as civilians are firmly placed outside the group and with the enemy, thus making it easier to commit violence against them. With psychological distancing, rationalizations are made with regard to the necessity of acting in brutal ways for the greater good (Moghaddam, 2005, p. 166). This unquestioning obedience of the individual towards the group creates those few subjects who are now fully radicalized to violence (Moghaddam, 2005).

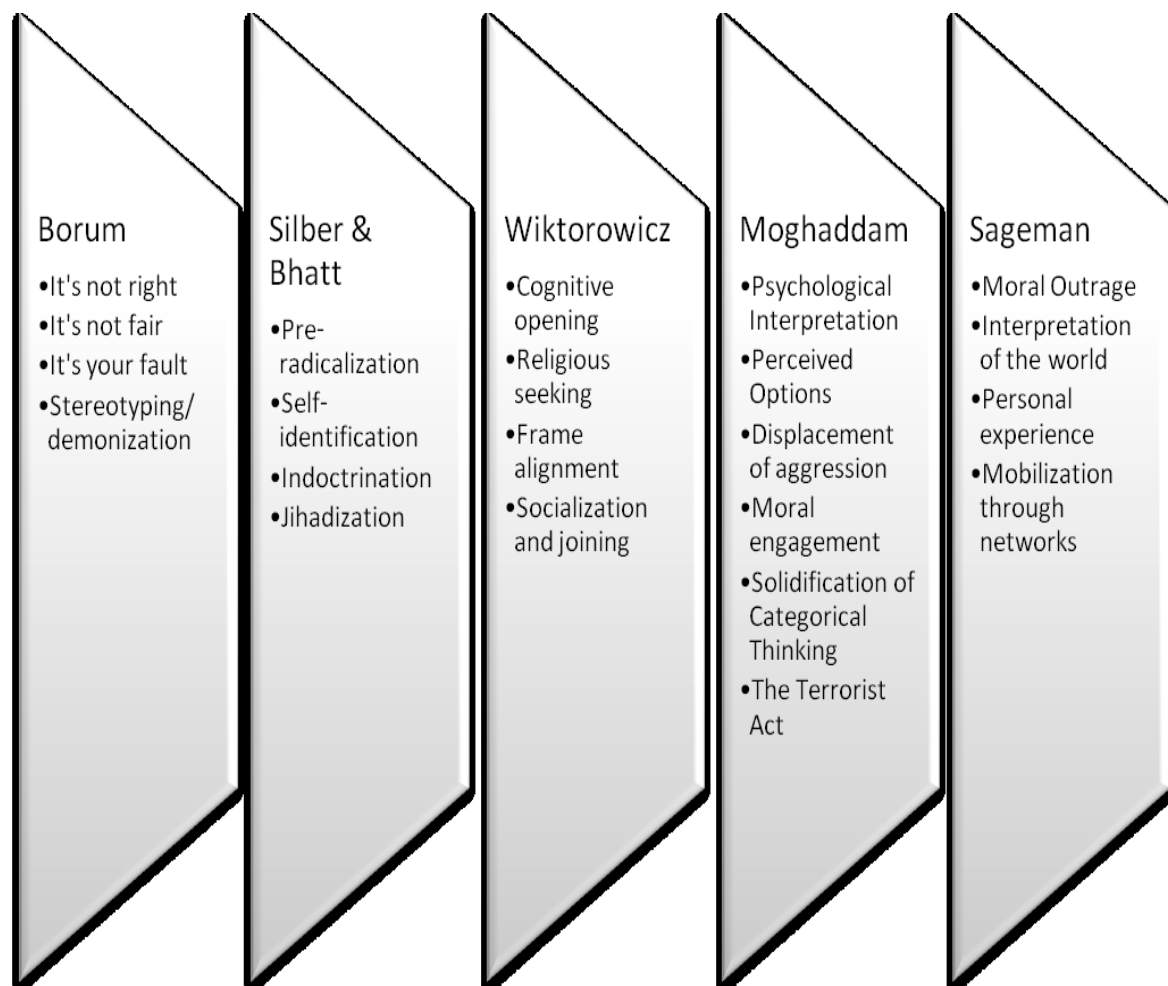
3.2.5 Sageman's Four Prongs

Finally, Sageman's (2008) Four Prongs model is important to consider as it is unique from the other previously mentioned frameworks. In his work titled "A Strategy for Fighting International Islamist Terrorists," he puts forth the notion that radicalization did not progress in stages, one after another, but resulted from exposure to the dynamics of the relationships between several recurring factors (Sageman, 2008, p. 2). Sageman's Four Prongs also supports the notion that this type of interaction is not necessarily relegated to face-to-face meetings but can occur through virtual networks as well (Sageman, 2008, p. 4). He begins with the first prong "moral outrage," which denotes an individual's perception to a specific event or state of affairs and also provides examples of what he terms "major moral violations" such as "killings, rapes, or local police actions" (Sageman, 2008, p. 2). The second prong, "interpretation of the world," essentially describes how the individual understands the world and how it can lead to more and more radical ideas. If someone has an ill-informed interpretation of events, one that is generally twisted, it risks creating a mindset of "us" (the radical group) against "them" (society at large), similar to Moghaddam's staircase (Sageman, 2008, p. 6).

The third factor, and one which Sageman highlights in particular, is that of "personal experience" which encompasses things like discrimination, unemployment and/or any other violations against the self (Sageman, 2008). Again, we see some correlation between theories as this stage is similar to Wiktorowicz's (2004) "cognitive opening" and Silber's and Bhatt's (2007) "self-identification." Sageman (2008) lists a fourth prong, "mobilization

through networks” as a crucial element for completely understanding the radicalization process. Becoming part of a group or network allows for constant interaction between those who share radical ideas, reinforcement and encouragement (Sageman, 2008). These organizations perform the role of “echo chambers” where members have a forum that aids in “amplifying their grievances, intensifying the members' bonds to each other, generating local values different from their host society's values, and facilitating a gradual separation from their host society” (Sageman, 2008, p. 4).

Figure 1: Theories of Radicalization



The radicalization frameworks presented in the previous section were selected because all consider the transformation as a process on an individual level; a series of steps which a subject travels to become fully radicalized. This concept is relatively new to researchers as previous work on extremism and radicalization looked at the phenomenon on a larger scale. Most academic inquiries approached it from a more global level, attempting to understand the broader political, social or economic conditions which would inspire groups to embracing extremism and carrying out extremist acts (Gartenstein-Ross & Grossman, 2009; Lööwe, 1998; Nacos, 1995). As I am approaching my analysis through the exploration of individual sentiments, the application of a theoretical framework which addresses radicalization with a more macro-level analysis would be inefficient at best, and in reality unworkable within the scope of this study.

It is important to note that while the choices my selected authors make in how they frame their theories may seem inappropriate within the context of this research, the reality is that these frameworks are entirely suited to understanding any individual who is travelling through the radicalization process. These frameworks are not unique to Islamic extremism but instead focused on conceptualizing a process which leads to the adoption of any type of radical philosophy. The fact that Islamic extremism is used to provide a context in understanding different stages is more a reflection of recent events in our collective history than a crucial element in understanding the radicalization process.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Goals

As previously mentioned, this study will examine how the structure of the radicalization process appears within discussions carried out online by members of a far-right extremist website. The radicalization process, in the context of this paper, consists of a series of steps or stages individuals travel through as they evolve from simply being inquisitive about extremist ideologies which may promote hate and violence against others to becoming adherent followers of these beliefs. Discourse conducted within the virtual world will be analyzed by establishing links between specific statements found in the dialogue and the descriptions of different stages found in the selected theories. The goal is to uncover not only representations of these stages of radicalization in the language, but to learn how they manifest themselves in terms of structure within the online exchanges as well: is it comparable to what is presented in the theoretical framework?

4.2 Methodological Choices

Thus the first goal of this study is to attempt to identify various stages of the radicalization process within the online discourse by linking them to the chosen theories outlined in this paper. To do so I will identify key words or phrases that can justifiably be connected to various radicalization stages through an association of terms found in the discourse and the descriptions of various steps in the radicalization processes.

As the purpose of this paper is to explore online discourse among members of an extremist group, my first step was to find the appropriate avatars to observe. An avatar is

essentially an individual's online representation of themselves, and this can be, potentially, either an advantage or a disadvantage to truly understanding human interaction. An avatar may indeed represent a raw, truthful and unfiltered version of someone, or it may be a complete fabrication based on what a person would like to be. Because my research goal is to take a very specific snapshot of a particular phenomenon, the question as to whether the avatars I selected are true representations or not is not one I will attempt to address here. Therefore, for the purposes of this particular inquiry, I am making the assumption that each avatar represents a different and unique individual who is interested in the ideologies and beliefs specific to Stormfront.org and not, for example, another researcher, undercover law enforcement agent or someone committing some other form of misrepresentation.

4.3 Sites to Analyze

As I already mentioned, for the purposes of my study, I will focus on one far-right discussion forum: Stormfront.org. This site was not selected at random, but based on several different sources. Brian Levin (2002), in his research "Cyberhate: A Legal and Historical Analysis of Extremists' Use of Computer Networks in America" cites Stormfront.org as being the "flagship" Internet site spreading racist skinhead ideologies and providing a means to connect with other members of the far-right movement. The site, which officially went online in April 1995 while the Internet was still in its infancy, is home to numerous links to other far-right sites and a plethora of discussion forums dealing with subjects such as "white supremacy, Jewish conspiracies, government atrocities, Black inferiority, Nazism, and guerrilla warfare tactics" (Levin, 2002, p. 958).

Stormfront was created by a man named Don Black, a neo-Nazi and former Klansman closely associated with David Duke (Caren et al., 2012, p. 172). Black learned computer programming while serving time in federal prison, convicted for his involvement in a failed coup attempt against the Dominican government with other white nationalist extremists (Caren et al., 2012, p. 172). Stormfront's original incarnation was a site that was populated primarily by supporters of once-presidential candidate David Duke and his various political objectives. Before 2001, the structure was geared more to the dissemination of information and far-right extremist ideologies in the form of essays, articles and 'news' reports. However, a shift occurred in the site after 2001 as it evolved from a one-way conduit of communication to a more interactive site, providing members the capacity to join debates, post comments and start new discussion threads (Caren et al., 2012).

The Southern Poverty Law Center, one of the most well-known non-profit organizations dedicated towards combatting racist extremism lists Stormfront as having "grown into what may be the Western world's most popular forum for so-called 'white nationalists'" (www.splcenter.org, 2014). The organization (SPLC) highlights the shift in format after 2001 as a major area of concern and also the chief reason for Stormfront's popularity. "The potential for dialogues to develop was built in—and, therefore, so was the potential to develop a genuine white supremacist cyber-community" (www.splcenter.org, 2014). The results speak for themselves: at the beginning of 2002 there were only 5,000

registered members on Stormfront and in less than six years that number had skyrocketed to approximately 133,000 (www.splcenter.org, 2014).

Furthermore, in an intelligence report for the Center titled “White Homicide Worldwide,” researcher Heidi Beirich (2014) discovered that not only does the site have a massive membership, but participants are disproportionately connected to acts of violence and murder. Close to one hundred ideologically or racially motivated homicides during a five year period were linked to active Stormfront members (Beirich, 2014). Beirich (2014) states that Stormfront “has been a magnet for the deadly and deranged” as some of the most infamous individuals responsible for incidents of extremist violence have not only been active members but were extremely prolific within the discussion forums (Beirich, 2014).

Finally, I performed a simple Google Internet search using key words such as “extremist group,” “far-right extremism” and “skinhead.” Results confirmed earlier findings that this website appeared most prominently, and therefore, became my final selection. Due to the importance Stormfront holds as a platform of communication within the skinhead community, it was clear that it would be an ideal site on which to monitor and analyze discourse among members. Stormfront.org is easily accessible online: all that is required is a computer and a valid network connection. The structure of the website is as follows: all discussion threads and postings are open to be viewed by the public however you must be a member in order to post statements, view member profiles or privately connect with them. In addition, membership is required in order to utilize some of the more

advanced filter and search options with regard to archived postings. To obtain membership and access to these areas, you must provide some basic personal information and a valid e-mail address.

Lastly, I felt that this website was a more appropriate choice for collecting the right data in order to respond to my research question. It is my belief that individuals participating in the dialogue found on Stormfront.org would be more likely to occupy all levels of the extremist spectrum as opposed to some of the more secretive and hidden sites, which I feel would be populated by subjects who had probably already moved quite far through the radicalization process. Because my research goal is to see what structure the radicalization process as characterised through the use of language takes within the online discourse, it is crucial that I have data set with the highest potential to contain representations of all stages, not just the later ones.

4.4 Data Saturation

The question of how much data to collect is a difficult one to answer with regard to qualitative research. The general standard to apply is that of data saturation. According to Bowen (2008) in his paper titled “Naturalistic Inquiry and the Saturation Concept: A Research Note,” data saturation occurs in qualitative research when the point has been reached where data collected does not produce new results and the same themes continue to emerge despite further data collection (Bowen, 2008, p. 140).

During the course of the data collection portion of this study, I began to see many of the same stages of radicalization emerging over and over again. Once I had reached that

point, I reviewed data collected to date and determined that after approximately sixty to seventy posts had been collected for each avatar, there was no significant change in the results. At that point, I decided to complete data collection at seventy-five posts for each avatar, secure in the belief that this number would provide enough material to conduct a proper analysis and that further collection would not necessarily result in any new or significant outcomes.

4.5 Ethical Concerns

Accessing material from deeper within Stormfront.org presented a dilemma as it raised some very specific ethical concerns. If I was to obtain a complete picture of this group for my study, becoming a member in order to gain access to restricted areas was essential. The problems I faced were: first, do I become a member, and second, do I do so under a false name or do I identify myself as a student doing research? I did believe that if I was to gain a true understanding of these organizations, I needed to obtain the data in the most natural setting possible and so it was vital that I not only became a member but did so under a pseudonym. Fortunately, I found several studies which supported this strategy, where researchers did join online groups under false names to conduct observations.

Brotsky et al. (2007) went undercover for her study “Inside the “Pro-Ana” Community: A Covert Online Participant Observation.” Brotsky et al. (2007) joined a private, online support group for people with eating disorders to gauge the level of care they received. Blevins and Holt (2009) took a similar approach in “Examining the Virtual Subculture of Johns.” As with Brotsky et al. (2007) they covertly observed the online

interaction between prostitutes and potential clients in an effort to better understand the interplay that existed (Blevins & Holt, 2009). In addition, and perhaps more relevant, was Pollock's (2009) examination of hate groups on the Web. In "Researching White Supremacists Online: Methodological Concerns of Researching Hate Speech," Pollock (2009) addressed the main ethical concerns regarding covert participant observation online and some of the rationalizations to support this stance. Using Pollock (2009) and the concerns he highlighted in his study, I will address those that specifically apply to this paper and in doing so justify the use of covert participant observation as a method of data collection. These concerns are essentially issues of privacy, or in other terms, invasion of privacy, informed consent of participants, and concerns of harm and risk to me and/or my research subjects (Pollock, 2009, pp. 16–17).

Let me begin by addressing privacy (Pollock, 2009). A case could indeed be made, that because some sections of each website that I would be examining were restricted to members only, there exists an implied right to privacy. However, I challenge that notion. Even though it is a members-only section, all contributors to these discussion boards understand that their posts will be available to be read by other members. Taking a rudimentary examination of Stormfront.org, I saw tens of thousands of posts. While admittedly this number does not necessarily represent membership on a post-to-person scale, it does seem to indicate that there are, at the very least, hundreds of participants and that expectation of privacy is null and void.

This also responds to concerns regarding the issue of informed consent: the idea that subjects of any research should be given the greatest possible amount of information regarding the study so as to be able to make a clear and well-informed decision as to whether or not to participate (Pollock, 2009). This, of course, was not possible while still remaining true to the principals of covert research, yet as with issues of privacy, the semi-public nature of these discussion forums negates the concern of informed consent. Because discussion boards and other types of online forums are accessible to relatively large numbers of people, public or private, there is no limit as to who is permitted to either view or take part in the discussions (Pollock, 2009).

Finally, special attention needed to be applied to the issue of harm and risk (Pollock, 2009), both to me and the participants in the investigation. While there was no face-to-face interactions, in this day and age of technologically savvy individuals, a few points bear mentioning. First, any and all posting that would be cited will be attributed to the online handle or avatar of the particular participant, providing no personal information that can be traced back to the individual. Given this precaution, there is no risk of identification or incrimination. As for my own safety, I, too, participated as a complete observer, under a false identity, and only logged onto these sites using a public network, which was in no way traceable to me personally.

4.6 Data Analysis: Content Analysis

The Stormfront.org website and discussion boards are extremely vast, and encompass not only thousands of posts, but hundreds of discussion threads as well. As a result, after a rather long

time exploring the site, I decided on specific criteria with regard to the subjects I would choose for this research. First was the type of avatar. On the site, there exists different classifications of members: from active to non-active members, sustaining members who donate money to keep the site operational, guest members who have access limited to specific areas, and lifetime members who have unlimited access to all areas of the website and special status with regard to search engines and abilities to begin discussion threads.

For my purposes, I decided to focus my efforts on active members who have been participating in discussion threads for at least two years and had a minimum of 500 total posts. I did not make any distinction with regard to which type of member they were (i.e., sustaining, guest, lifetime, etc.), but did require that their most recent post be no more than two months old from the start date of my data collection. I then performed a very limited type of purposive sampling, more specifically criterion sampling, which is ideal for small sample sizes of this nature (Teddlie, 2007). Based on the above listed parameters, I searched through several posts and chose avatars who met all my requirements. It is extremely important once again to acknowledge that this sample size is insufficient to draw any real and definitive conclusions from the analysis, however, due to certain constraints in time, resources and the planned scope of this paper, the small sample size was necessary. As a result, this may be regarded as exploratory research into this very fascinating issue. Even with this limited number of avatars, I was still presented with an extremely large amount of data to analyse: the average amount of total posts for an active member of at least two years is in the thousands. While daunting at first, this did allow me to draw a much more complete picture with regard to the scope of my paper;

however, because the amount of material available was so vast, it became necessary to narrow my research even further.

After exploring the different discussion forums available, I decided to draw all my posts from one in particular titled *Newslinks and Articles*, which allowed me to explore how members reacted to events of the day. Because it is my assertion that the radicalization process is a progression which occurs over time based on exposure to interactions with extremist individuals, groups and ideologies and not an instantaneous transformation, I felt the selection of the *Newslinks and Articles* to be the most appropriate. My decision to use this forum as my choice of data was inspired by Gerstenfeld et al. (2003), who explored the interesting connection between news articles posted on far-right extremist websites and how they influence the formation and evolution of extremist activities and ideologies. Gerstenfeld et al. (2003) found a definite increase in activity and responses to particular posts highlighting news stories and that these threads by far elicited the most lively and in-depth discourse.

Furthermore, using *Newslinks and Articles* gave me a chronological structure which provided a clearer timeline of the journey through the radicalization process and a method of comparison as to how a subject responds to an event involving some type of racial dynamics during their earliest weeks as members, compared to their most recent weeks. It is important to note however that the validity of any alleged news report which is posted on Stormfront.org must be called into question, but since this was not relevant to my purposes or to the framework of any radicalization process cited in this work, I have consciously made no attempt to determine the truthfulness of any news story.

While there were several other promising forums, such as *Ideology and Philosophy* where members discussed the white nationalist beliefs or *Opposing Views* where there were several rather lively debates on various issues, after a fairly in-depth exploration of many of the discussion threads found on these forums I rejected them as potential sources of data. I found that many of the postings found within *Ideology and Philosophy* were, in my opinion, far too disingenuous and polished. They lacked a sense that the avatar in question was providing an honest representation of themselves, and despite the name of the forum, I found the data to be of relatively poor quality. Many posts provided views that were particularly edited and constructed for mass consumption; there was a concerted effort to couch all postings in very 'friendly' and 'palatable' terms for the general public.

With regard to *Opposing Views*, again the data was of poor quality at the time of collection. The majority of threads were extremely short and many posts were made up of one word responses. As a result, threads tended to simply peter out and lacked any real level of robust participation. Furthermore, more than half the threads did not address any subjects relating to skinhead ideologies or events and other matters that are important to the movement. Many discussions related to issues that would be quite at home on other conventional and non-extremist websites.

Once I decided on a forum, the next stage was to choose avatars and the amount of posts I would analyse. Based on the principles of data saturation and because I felt it would provide me with enough data to carry out my study and at the same time be manageable, I decided on three avatars from which I would analyse seventy-five posts each for a total of 225

posts. I discovered that past posts for a particular discussion forum were archived to a maximum of 1250 and that this cataloguing was based on the amount of total posts, not the dates on which they were posted. In other words, even if two avatars had the maximum amount of posts archived, the date on which those statements were posted may be dramatically different. For each avatar, I decided to break up my data selection into three components: the first twenty-five written, the last twenty-five written and twenty-five in between each subject's total. As not all selected had the maximum number of posts in their archive, these selections differed from individual to individual. The purpose of this sampling strategy was to create a data pool that represented different time periods in each avatar's involvement with the site and their different experiences as members of the white nationalist organization.

One of the universal key factors found in various models of the radicalization process is that the equation of time, plus exposure, equals radicalization. As a consequence, I feel that by analysing my seventy-five posts broken up this way, a clearer picture would emerge as to whether or not I could see if a subject moved through the various stages, as opposed to if I had simply taken seventy-five consecutive posts occurring over a much briefer time frame. The three avatars I selected were chosen while exploring a particular discussion thread found in the *Newslinks and Articles* category. As mentioned earlier, they simply needed to be active members, have contributed more than five hundred posts, and have participated in a discussion within at least sixty days from the start of my data collection. Finding enough individuals was hardly a problem. So based on these conditions, I settled on the following avatars for my research: Ironman1, Kentucky Headhunter and Lone Guard.

All the information collected on each avatar was found on their individual personal pages, all quite similar in structure to pages you would see on more mainstream social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace. In addition to links which connect to all postings made by each subject, there was other information found on each page: membership in social networking groups which were part of the site, lists of friends, photo albums, blog entries, and places where individuals could post public messages for the recipient. While interesting, and worth a quick note, this type of data was irrelevant to the purpose of my study and was not used to analyse my findings.

The realm of social inquiry has always had an unfortunate stigma attached to it which claims our research is more art than science. That, unlike the so-called hard sciences, social studies is more about description and less about the collection and dissemination of real facts. Many of these criticisms stem from the methods which are used in collecting and analyzing data for qualitative investigation. Techniques such as ethnography, observation and interviews have always drawn a certain amount of scorn from those who demand structured, repeatable methodology in order to classify a study as a scientific pursuit. There does exist, however, one type of analysis that responds to many of these concerns, that of content analysis.

Content analysis is defined as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of communications" (Berelson, 1952, p. 74). As a methodology, content analysis is most often used with regard to media analysis but it is not strictly limited to that medium. It is a technique which uncovers both explicit

and implicit messages in subject matter such as different forms of “media or communications” through precise categorizing and coding of data and enables a researcher to reveal “patterns and trends” within the selected material, understanding content on a deeper level (Tewksbury, 2009, p. 46). The objects of study can be anything from “magazine articles, television sitcoms, suicide notes, criminal confessions” and the data to be coded can include images, words, phrases or sentences and even themes, depending on study design and the objective of the researcher and what they are trying to uncover (Tewksbury, 2009, p. 46).

Content analysis is quite at home in the information age and is uniquely suited to the vast array of media that now touches every aspect of our lives, not the least of which is online radical groups and their activities (Gerstenfeld et al., 2003; Du Plessis, 2008). When applied appropriately, it is particularly efficient at organizing and analyzing massive amounts of data and can act as an excellent method of reduction through categorizing and coding to focus research on desired goals (Namey et al., 2007, p. 138). It is also a method of social science research that can respond to the demands of the scientific establishment as it produces high levels of reliability and validity due to the systematic and repeatable nature of the technique (Namey et al., 2007). Finally, it is a method of analysis which is very cost effective in terms of resources, easy to carry out and unobtrusive. Therefore, it is for all these reasons that I deemed this methodology ideal for my purposes.

4.7 Data Collection: Covert Observation

When I began considering this research paper, I had entertained other forms of data collection such as interviews or participant observation; however, I found these to be extremely problematic to pursue due to the secretive and suspicious nature of the type of group I'm studying. Therefore, covert participant observation provided the most feasible way in which to carry out my data collection. Because this group represents a type of organization that is difficult for outsiders to gain access to, covert observation allowed me to have an insider's view of a normally closed-off group, via their websites. The websites, essentially, enabled me to perform fieldwork without facing the challenges of getting past gatekeepers or contacting members. Furthermore, I reformulated issues of reliability and validity, as all the activities I observed and data I collected, will be accessible to others online.

While there are no set guidelines as to how to undertake covert participant observation, there are certain factors to bear in mind. A research stance must be determined and choices range from a complete participant whose purpose is known by the research subjects and will actively engage them to a complete observer whose purpose is unknown and does nothing but observe (Calvey, 2013). Depending on the goal of the research and the dynamics of the subjects in question, one stance may work better than another. For my purpose, I elected to take the complete observer stance to ensure I did not distort the data collected by my presence so as to obtain the most truthful picture possible of this particular group.

Covert research entails a type of data collection wherein subjects are either not aware of the true objective the study is attempting to achieve or they do not know they are being studied at all (Spicker, 2011), and it is particularly useful for research into the type of topics pursued by scholars and students of criminology (Miller, 1995). Though this may sound duplicitous or unethical, there are degrees of covert research. For example, when a researcher attends a sporting event or public gathering and conducts observations regarding those proceedings, this can be classified as covert research (Spicker, 2011).

When dealing with organizations such as skinheads and extremist groups, access can be extremely difficult. Such groups are, by their very nature, secretive and suspicious, with a low tolerance for outsiders, and nothing of value would be gained by an overt approach. If we want to expand our understanding of these organizations, methodologies such as covert participant observation must be applied. Using this method allows the researcher to take a more or less “natural position” within the group, and as a result, can observe and record typical behaviours without influencing those behaviours in some unintended way (Miller, 1995, p. 98).

There is also the issue of reflexivity, and how my conducting research would affect the data gathered. Here again, covert participant observation is particularly useful for my purposes. If I was to present myself as a student from Ottawa University, and if I made plain my intention of examining how individuals interacted and developed through exchanges within the group, it is safe to assume that I would collect a very different set of data. This

altering effect on the data would not reflect the reality of the group, but in all likelihood, a distortion of it (Miller, 1995).

Conducting covert observations involve a variety of activities and considerations: deciding what and when to observe, for how long, keeping detailed field notes and writing up the findings. For the purposes of this project, I joined Stormfront.org under a false name and as a result, gained access to all areas of the site. Then, I observed the site for an initial period of thirty days to assess the interactions between individuals as they participated in online discussion forums, assuming the stance of complete observer. This meant that I needed to remain completely unobtrusive in my observations and in no way take part in any of the discussions I was analyzing, nor attempt to interview or communicate with any of individuals who were chosen as my research subjects. To achieve this it was necessary to create my own avatar which involved only a few steps.

First, I was prompted to register with Stormfront.org and provide some generic information such as name, gender, birthdate, to which I gave fictitious responses and they also required an e-mail address. This was also fictitious, and created solely for the purposes of this study using one of the many available free e-mail accounts and then subsequently deleted upon conclusion of data collection. I then created a password which was confirmed valid and that was it. After the initial log on and an exploration of the site, I joined several discussion forums and remained in the background, allowing the discourse to unfold naturally free from any influence or interaction on my part.

However, due to the poor quality of data collected during this period, and realizing that using the additional time available to me would not greatly improve my data set, I decided instead to utilize the stored postings of each avatar, which were easily accessible by simply visiting their individual pages. Past postings are stored up to a maximum of 1250 statements, based solely on amount and not date; in other words, postings did not end on a specific time, instead some avatars had postings as old as five years and some only as old as two. This became the primary pool from which I drew my data as I had discovered that online exchanges are less than consistent and not constrained by time: a single discussion may take months to fully play out. Therefore, the archived postings allowed me not only to have a data set which was far more complete, but also gave me a much broader range of statements to analyze and thus provided a more in-depth picture of how the structure of the radicalization process presents itself within the discourse. Some may point out that because I drew my data from archived postings, my collection methodology should no longer be considered covert observation, however, I would argue this is not the case. Because all selected excerpts I have chosen for analysis are still part of conversations which have not yet technically ended, the data would not fall under the same definition as say minutes of a meeting or transcripts of a debate. Members are able to post additional comments regardless of the start date of a particular discussion thread; therefore I am still observing an active dialogue between members of which I am choosing to analyze selected statements as opposed to simply reviewing documents or records.

4.8 Higher-Order Grouping of Radicalization Theories

Even by focusing on a select group of theories, there still remains a great deal of information within those frameworks which at times overlap or can be entirely different. To facilitate the data analysis process, and allow for a more concise and accessible set of results, I have created a set of higher order categories which group together stages of radicalization which are similar in description and definition, despite having originated from different authors. This will allow me to analyze my findings by using these categories as the backdrop and linking them to specific posts in an effort to demonstrate evidence of the stages of radicalization. Below is an outline of the different categories I created to represent master stages of the process.

4.8.1 Level One: Seeking Answers

This level represents all the stages of the various theories that address a state where the initial conditions exist which can inspire individuals to search for the means to change their situation, and as a result, potentially lead them down the pathway of the radicalization process. Due to feelings of dissatisfaction, outrage or want, subjects begin to develop an emerging awareness of their unfavorable place in society. Based on this new perception, which may or may not be rooted in reality, they become motivated to seek out answers or solutions to their dilemma, which comes in the form of a shift in identity and how they see the world. Individuals will be drawn to groups or ideologies that provide answers and give them a sense of purpose or community.

I chose to label this section as seeking answers because I felt that it best represented the tone of the different steps included at this level which comes from the first and second stages of the chosen theories. For example, when considering Silber and Bhatt (2007), the first and second stages of their concept of the radicalization process are pre-radicalization and self-identification. In these two stages, conditions exist for individuals which leads them to begin to seek out more extreme ideas based on their life situation. We see the same from Borum (2003) in his first stage of "it's not right" and in his second of "it's not fair," where a subject is confronted with a state of being in which they feel unfulfilled and wanting. This is quite similar to Mogaddam's (2005) "psychological interpretation of material conditions and perceived options" and to Sageman's (2008) "moral outrage," both representing situations that result in a person wanting to evoke change to their present state which they deem unacceptable, and looking for a method to accomplish this. Even Wiktorowicz's (2004) "stages of cognitive opening" and "religious seeking": all represent the overall conditions in which a person or group exists which has the potential to lead them to greater and greater levels of radicalization.

These factors can include a sense of unhappiness or deprivation to a triggering event which inspires an individual to seek a change to address his/her problematic life situation. This change comes in the form of a new way of thinking or identity, a shift from a directionless, unmotivated individual to a purposeful, motivated one and is achieved through a search of solutions which may take the form of radical groups, discourse or materials. However, subjects who find themselves in those stages that fall under this level

are far from completing the transformation and becoming fully radicalized. To do this they must continue through to the next phases of the process.

The data which I attributed to this level included two major concepts: curiosity about ideologies and dissatisfaction and outrage with their present situation in life or a specific event. With regard to the first element, I linked key words or phrases that represented a desire to explore, understand, relate or identify with the extremist ideologies held by skinheads. For example, these included instances in which the poster demonstrated a desire to gain a more in-depth understanding of a particular belief system or when a poster clearly associated themselves to a particular group and its ideologies. As far as the second major theme, this was found in abundance and was demonstrated through statements which expressed anger, resentment or even outright rage towards an event or simply a specific ongoing state of affairs.

4.8.2 Level Two: Attributing Blame

The second level in this framework is that of attributing blame. This represents the stages where individuals focus their feelings of discontent or rage on a specific group or subject. Having now passed through the seeking answers phase, and having found groups or ideologies that resonate with them, the next step is to apply culpability for their problems on a particular target. Essentially, it is here where blame is laid on the doorstep of a specific group, making them responsible for all the hardships or issues the person might have. Instead of self-reflection, a scapegoat is sought allowing an individual to focus his or her anger externally.

Wikitorowicz, Silber and Bhatt are the only theorists which do not have a stage that fits into this group, all others do. Mogaddam's (2005) next step in his framework is "displacement of aggression," and it is here a group is singled out and becomes the target of anger. Borum's (2003) "it's your fault" stage describes how individuals identify a target group then goes on to assign responsibility for their troubles to them, thus fostering resentment and hostility. Sageman (2008) also defines this concept of attributing blame very clearly in his second stage of "us versus them": obviously portraying a step in which the radicalizing individual begins to draw battle lines between themselves and another group who they start to view as the enemy. This is a crucial stage in the radicalization process as it allows the person to continue on the path and helps justify and rationalize the next stages.

Key words and phrases which were coded into this level are fairly self-explanatory. I searched out data which essentially revolved around attributing guilt: either through the clear cut assigning of responsibility to a particular group. or a distorted conception of the world. Examples included statements made by avatars which squarely place the blame on a particular ethnic group for the poor conditions of their neighbourhood or a vast Jewish conspiracy for the negative state of the economy.

4.8.3 Level Three: Adopting Ideologies

The next level, labelled adopting ideologies, represents the moments when individuals not only become true believers, but wholly embrace the views and attitudes of their chosen group. It is here where subjects formally take on extremist's philosophies and become

members of radical groups, espousing their ideologies. Old ideas are pushed aside and more radicalized views are embraced, along with a sense of membership and bonding with the group. The group also provides support and strengthens the newly held belief system by normalizing any radical ideas about either their target or the use of extreme measures to achieve their goals.

Not all frameworks address this level, however. Silber and Bhatt (2007) describe this step as *indoctrination*, when a subject becomes fully accepted by the group and accepting of the group's ideologies. Wiktorowicz (2004) labels these stages as "frame alignment" and "socialization and joining." The former denotes the process of the individual's world view now aligning with the more radical and extreme concepts purported by the group. These ideas are also bolstered by the group for the benefit of the individual, ensuring that any doubt or hesitation is removed. The latter is the complete acceptance of the group's ideologies, withdrawal from mainstream society and, to varying extents, a loss of individuality.

Mogaddam (2005) theory draws links with adopting ideologies from a slightly different angle: through his stages of "moral engagement" and "solidification of categorical thinking," where the group reinforces the individual, allowing for a further progression down the radicalization pathway. According to Mogaddam (2005), individuals start to differentiate between themselves and all others who do not believe in their chosen ideology. It is here that their 'membership' becomes a crucial factor due to the normalization and reinforcement of the individual's complaints and anger within their

group of choice, thus fostering a sense of community and bonding. This also leads to Mogaddam (2005) step of officially joining, where the person is now a full member of a radicalized group and completely accepting of the group's world view. Finally, Borum (2003) adds to this level when he describes a stage where the radicalizing subject now begins to accept the larger views of the group, which build on the previous level and conceive of their target as less than human, not worthy of sympathy or mercy, going so far as to completely demonize them.

The data culled for this level was the most diverse. While it all revolved around the notion of adopting a particular extremist ideology, there were several facets in this concept which fell under three major themes. First was the complete aligning of views with that of the group's beliefs, as seen in posts made which no longer question, challenge or contradict the ideologies of the group. Second was the idea of officially joining a particular extremist organization. In terms of the discourse, this was represented by statements that clearly showed the avatar not simply associating or identify with the group, but now a full-blown advocate for its principles and beliefs. Finally, the third theme could be considered by some as the same as an "aligning of views," however, I felt it deserved to be recognized on its own—demonizing target groups. This was arguably the easiest choice to justify as it was clearly represented by dialogue that made reference to opposing groups in extremely insulting and derogatory ways. I believe this is an extremely important factor in transitioning to the next level.

4.8.4 Level Four: Mobilization to Violence

The final level, that of mobilization to violence, has stages from all theories present save for Borum and Wiktorowciz, and it essentially describes the moments when individuals begin to officially network with other extremists and even go so far as conceive of or implement plans for violent actions as part of the group of which they are members. This is where there exists the greatest potential for danger and the shift from a simply radical viewpoint to violent extremist. At this point the individual is so entrenched within the group they are no longer thinking in any other terms except those set out by the organization; they have reached a stage where all is permissible in the name of ideological leanings, and violence is a legitimate tactic. With regard to how this manifested within the online discourse, it was representative of dialogue which discussed or described the use, planning, incitement or advocating of violence and violent activity directed towards an individual or as a solution for a problematic situation.

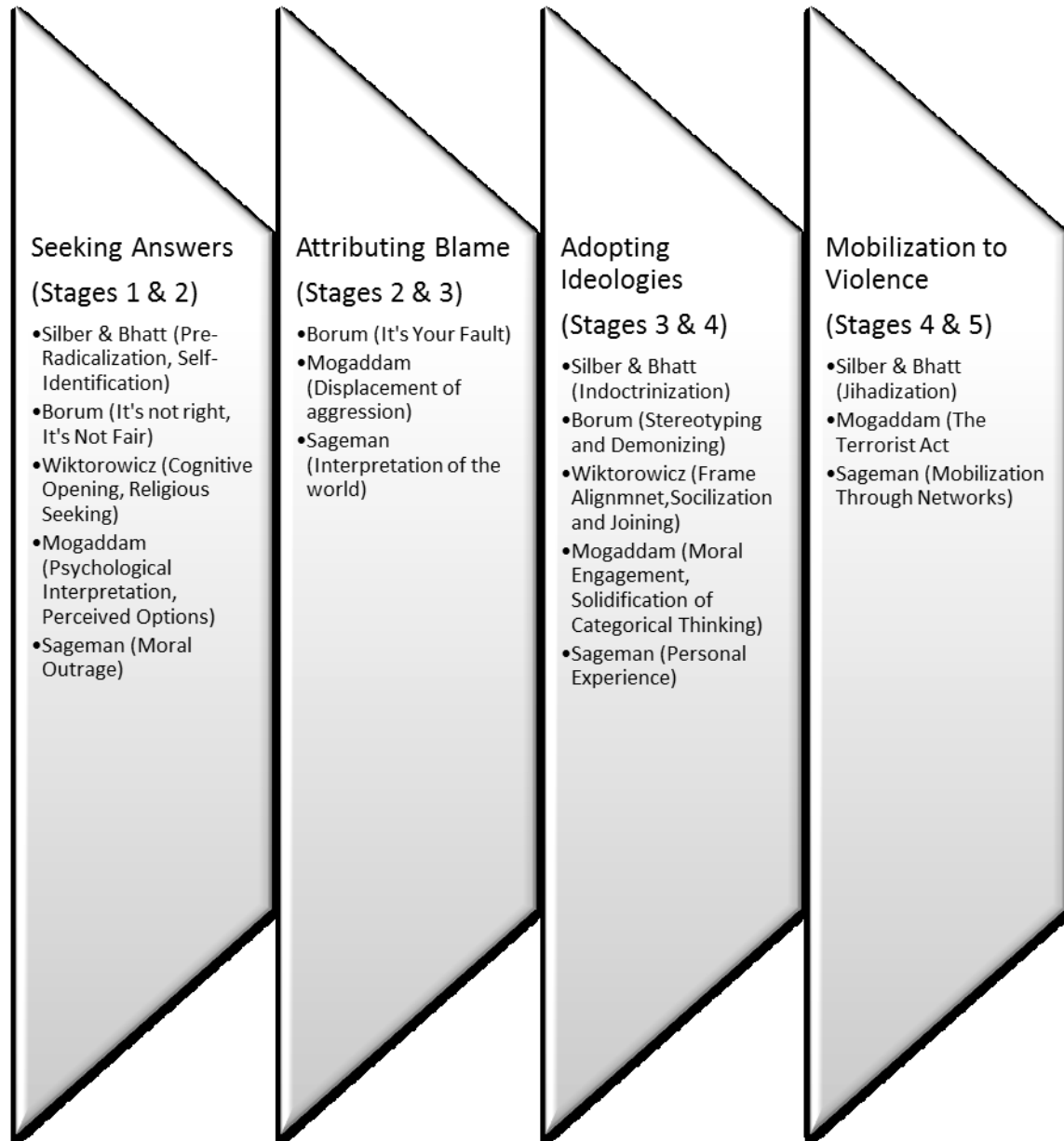
In their research on Islamic Fundamentalist, Sliber and Bhatt (2007) label this stage as *jihadization*, which signals a commitment to use extreme methods, such as violence, to carry out their goals based on their beliefs. Subjects have reached the zenith of the radicalization process and are now ready and willing to use any and all means necessary to further the group's aims. Mogaddam (2005) explains this stage as the terrorist act, where individuals give unquestioned obedience to the group and, here again, marks the moment when violence is no longer viewed negatively or with any apprehension. If called upon to commit acts of terror or to sacrifice themselves, they will do so willingly. Sageman (2008)

also addresses this level with his “mobilization through network” stage. As the name suggests, it is here that individuals will now take action through various radical and extremist group network connections. These activities can include training, travel and, of course, violent acts.

This final level includes themes of violence: any and all mention of committing violence, the planning of violence and even the incitement of violence against target groups. Statements which clearly demonstrate the avatar’s ease with violence as a solution or a tactic against target groups are included here. For example, an individual describing a story about a criminal act perpetrated by a member of a target group cites possible violent solutions in dealing with the accused would fit nicely into this level.

On the following page (Figure 2) is a visual representation of the four higher-order categories. As outlined in the previous section, each of these groupings is an organization of specific stages of radicalization that hold certain larger themes in common. These categorizations are not simply based on how they are positioned within each theory but by what they represent in terms of the level of transformation an individual has achieved within the process. I will use these categories as an analytical tool to highlight links between key words and phrases within the discourse I am examining, and as a basis for justification with regard to how I determine the selected statements to represent various steps in the radicalization process.

Figure 2: Higher-Order Grouping of Radicalization Steps



5.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Overview of Analysis

When examining the results of my analysis, a number of clear components surface. The first of which is the definite appearance of several stages of the radicalization process represented through the communications between members. In the following section, I will highlight certain selected postings to provide examples of these links. Obviously, not all posts analyzed contained references or evidence that could be applied to the radicalization process. For example, a post that Ironman1 wrote as part of a discussion thread titled “France bans citizen journalists from reporting violence,” simply read “no, nothing to look at here, now move along” (Stormfront, 2014). This was a comment in reference to a previous post that was in this particular thread, but in and of itself, contained no key words or concepts that would apply to radicalization.

That being said that I did discover concrete representations of my different categories in the language used by each and every avatar selected. Clear and defined links were made between statements drawn from the Stormfront discussion boards and components of my higher-order categories based on the different stages of the chosen theories of the radicalization process. Another important element to emerge was the clear lack of a transformative process within the dialogue. When identifying my different higher-order categories as represented within the discourse and then organizing those same groupings against the backdrop of each avatar’s chronological participation, no discernible or structured pattern was evident. In fact, the language each subject used, which I

determined adequately constructed representations of different categories, was erratic, interchangeable and did not progress in a linear fashion whatsoever.

5.2 Overview of Avatars

I began by looking at Ironman1, who was both a lifetime and a sustaining member. A sustaining member represents those individuals who have, at some point during their involvement with Stormfront, donated money to the organization, while a lifetime member denotes more of a social status within this online community. Ironman1's total activity level on the site to date is 9893 postings, in various discussion threads, and, in particular, within my category of interest, *Newslinks and Articles*, he has a total of 1250 posts, the maximum amount capable of being archived. These posts range in date from February 24, 2007, to March 31, 2013, and my analysis revealed that of the seventy-five posts selected, thirty-two contained the necessary criteria to satisfy the conditions laid out for this research, which is to say they included elements within the language that represented various stages of the radicalization theories organized within my higher-order categories. In addition to his discussion board activity, Ironman1 had also posted one photo album and six blog entries with subjects addressing issues at work, family pets, and historical moments he feels are significant to racial purity.

Kentucky Headhunter, the second avatar I chose, became a member on April 23, 2008. He had the least amount of activity of the three avatars chosen at only 785 posts and was neither a lifetime member nor a sustaining one. He demonstrated a greater level of radicalization within his discourse however: forty-six of seventy-five posts meeting the

required conditions for inclusion into higher-order categories. While he had not displayed any additional material aside from discussion posts—no blog entries or albums—what made Kentucky Headhunter interesting was the availability of his first postings. Generally speaking, an avatar’s first postings will show a clearer picture of the attitudes and the beliefs held when they first joined (true in this case), before any real exposure, and in that sense, can help demonstrate what, if any, transformations may have occurred after they began having regular exposure to this white nationalist group. Furthermore, Kentucky Headhunter’s texts are very rich in length and detail compared to the other avatars chosen for this paper. In his more recent posts, Kentucky Headhunter had a tendency to make lengthy contributions to discussion threads, very clearly outlining his philosophy and views, which allowed for an in-depth analysis.

The last avatar selected was Lone Guard, also a lifetime and a sustaining member who joined the site on April 20, 2005. Lone Guard made a total of 4547 posts over the course of his membership, and among the seventy-five selected for analysis, forty-four postings displayed descriptions within the language of stages of radicalization. Similar to Kentucky Headhunter however, Lone Guard did not have any blog entries, nor did he have photo albums or any additional activity aside from contributing to discussion threads. He did have some additional activity in the form of posts to his personal page, but these were of a relatively benign nature, and usually from friends.

5.3 Level One: Seeking Answers

The analysis presented here does have several limitations which must be acknowledged at the onset. There are definite restrictions with regard to what can be legitimately pulled from the discourse. My creation of higher-order categories is simply to better organize the five theories on radicalization which conceive of this phenomenon in terms of a process or evolution. That being said, the statements made by my selected avatars which I deemed to have links to my higher-order categories cannot be expected to represent a true transformation or process to radicalization on a physical level within an individual.

Some avatars displayed scant examples of certain categories and others were not exhibited altogether. This is not to suggest that a transformation is not occurring, it is just to underline that the data used and criteria chosen for this research cannot provide credible evidence to support this notion. Instead, the objective is to determine if elements of radicalization appear in the language used by the avatars and if these statements follow any discernable chronological pattern in the virtual dialogue.

The following section highlights several postings I deemed representative of my first higher-order level, seeking answers, based on the content of each statement. This grouping contains several main themes which would spark an individual to search out or become interested in extremist philosophies. These include anger or outrage towards a situation, an openness to explore new beliefs and interpretations of the world and a desire to identify with a particular group or ideology.

The first statement chosen was by Ironman1, found in the 'oldest posts' sub-group, part of a thread titled "Hard Times for the NAACP". Here we see definite examples of level one (seeking answers), which encompasses all the elements of each radicalization theory that address the initial moments or conditions that spark an interest in more extreme ways of thinking as a means to solve any problems or issues one might have.

Translation: Our policy should be one of trying to extort as much money from White people and businesses as possible. This is much easier than dealing with the endemic problems of negro stupidity, crime, laziness and sense of entitlement.

Here Ironman1 is providing what he believes to be a correct translation of a statement made by a spokesperson for the NAACP. His sense of outrage at the policies and actions of the NAACP is obvious by his description of what he sees as their true objective, which is not to further civil rights, but to take advantage of "White people" and ignore what he, Ironman1, believes are the true problems standing in the way of racial equality: "negro stupidity, crime, laziness and sense of entitlement." While one may argue that the description that Ironman1 applies of African-Americans is more suited to fall under level three, adopting ideologies, where one of the chief aspects is the dehumanization and stereotyping of a target group, I argue in this case, it is not applicable.

To truly be relevant for inclusion to level three, the language Ironman1 uses towards African-Americans would need to be much more aggressive and contain ideas of advocating violence or violent acts. While Ironman1 is certainly making insulting judgments regarding African-Americans as a group, he has not yet crossed the threshold to truly dehumanizing discourse. Instead, what Ironman1 is doing is creating a narrative which frames a conflict

between his group (so-called white people) and others, defining white people as victims set upon by a calculating and malicious organization whose whole reason for being is to represent an inferior and debauched people.

Ironman1's post describes clear hostility and resentment toward both the NAACP and African-Americans as a whole. While Ironman1 clearly does not wish to be African-American, he seems to resent what he sees as their ability to abuse the system and raise money while not doing any hard work. This represents one of the main concepts in the seeking answers level, a state which describes an individual as having a sense of injustice about a situation or about the behaviour of an outside group. When this occurs, individuals have the greatest potential to become open and curious about radical ideologies that purport to explain the 'why' and provide solutions to address these inequities. This perspective is clear in Ironman1's post in how he describes the NAACP's tactics in pursuit of their organizational aims. It is implicit in the tone of his dialogue that he sees the NAACP as an organization that is receiving preferential treatment and is not being judged on their conduct fairly. Instead, because they represent minority interests, they are allowed massive leeway and permitted to behave in a manner that would not be tolerated by society towards Ironman1 and his group.

Another example from the 'mid-range' of Lone Guard's participation on Stormfront.org begins with a post in response to a conversation over the sentencing of an African-American woman who was convicted of child abuse, allegedly having exposed a newborn baby to the elements resulting in the child's apparent death, titled "Negress gets 1

year for throwing newborn out in cold to die.” On December 18, 2011, Lone Guard made this contribution to the dialogue:

Compare this to a local white boy who was sentenced to 7 years in jail for accidentally killing his friend in a hunting accident.

Which is more plausible? The courts really are racists and value White lives more than black. Or,

The courts really are anti-White and give Whites harsher punishments than blacks.

This post falls nicely within the organizational structure of the first level, seeking answers. Lone Guard articulates these sentiments in several phrases found in this text. Declarations such as “the courts really are anti-White” and they “give Whites harsher punishments than blacks” succinctly describe ideas of moral outrage and injustice. In this state, an individual sees a particular situation as unjust and/or plainly wrong, and as a result, experiences feelings of anger and aggression toward that situation. This is not the same as feelings of animosity towards a particular group however, which is found in the second level.

By comparing a story about a white individual, the one that Lone Guard obviously identifies with, to that of the African-American woman whom he believes did not receive the proper judgment of the law, Lone Guard demonstrates that he is positioned firmly in the seeking answers phase. The feelings in this level then spur the individual to begin to consider a new way of thinking, leading them to become curious and more open to radical ways of thinking. These concepts are not about focusing on a target but instead setting the stage for the commencement of radicalization. It opens individuals up to new ways of thinking and the acceptance of extreme ideas.

5.4 Level Two: Attributing Blame

In this section I will provide several examples of how I justified the organization of data to fall under my second level, "Attributing Blame." The themes which make up this group include the attribution of blame and the directing of anger towards a specific group and the initial acceptance of a world view influenced by a particular ideology, in this instance, white supremacy. It is important to note however, at this stage the subject has yet to fully accept and embrace extremist views, rather, they are simply beginning to frame their understanding of events within the context of these new beliefs.

My first example comes from Ironman1 and a post, dated July 3, 2008, found as part of a thread titled "Manhole cover theft on the rise," and it discusses several news items that were reporting that thefts of manhole covers were on the rise in American cities.

Naturally, as the Jew dominates the scrap trade, they accept these items. The sell price for #1 Cast is >\$500 (USD)/ton, the Jews are probably paying these crackheads \$100/ton. Scrap steel is going into 4 figures (\$1000/ton) this month (July 2008).

This post is an excellent example of level two: attributing blame. This level was formulated to describe all the elements of radicalization that represent the moment when an individual identifies a group as either having conditions more favorable than theirs and thus causing a sense of resentment, being the cause of their problems or failures or being responsible for issues that threaten their chosen ideologies or organizations on a larger scale.

In the above post, Ironman1 concludes that the thefts of manhole covers by "crackheads" are as a result of the domination of the scrap trade by Jewish business people.

He asserts that Jews engage in, at the very least, unethical business practices by buying scrap metal from crackheads, and further implies that these same Jews do not care where the crackheads might have gotten the manhole covers from. In fact, Ironman1 goes a step further and speculates that the Jews are dishonest: taking advantage of the crackheads and cheating them of the full value of the manhole covers.

One of the difficulties encountered in this analysis is the issue of hate-inspired descriptions within the discourse, as this particular posting has in spades. The reason these types of statements pose such a problem is that many may challenge the conceptualization of certain statements linking to certain categories. One could argue that most, if not all postings, cited in this paper should fall under level three, adopting Ideologies, where one of the main concepts is dehumanization and stereotyping. Yet I believe this would be far too simplistic an approach, make for a very uninteresting paper and would demonstrate a lack of depth when considering the language of the online discourse.

As mentioned in previous sections, I believe it is important to separate insulting terminology from truly degrading and debasing discourse. While the above post certainly describes Jewish people in a negative light, it only goes so far: instead the dialogue is more representative to the classification of individuals and the attribution of blame. The language used by Ironman1 clearly describes the 'Jews' as a group and labels them responsible for the negative situation discussed. It does not, however, go so far as to use descriptive terms within the discourse framing Jews as less than human or likening them to sub-human creatures. Furthermore, when applying the conceptualization of a process as an

accumulation of stages, it makes perfect sense that one would see overlap of different higher-order levels within a single posting. Yet, as explained, we can still identify the overriding theme in a particular posting which would justify its inclusion to a specific level more than another.

Another statement I felt falls under level two was found among Ironman1's most recent postings, dated February 26, 2013, under the thread "Chuck Hagel confirmed as Secretary of Defense" that discusses the appointment of the new Secretary. Ironman1 states his views on the position and the implications of this particular appointment:

*Sec of Defense do not make policy (with the exception of Bobby McNamara).
They are just errand boys for whoever sits in the Oval Office. IOW, ZOG stooges.*

There is evidence with Ironman1's choice of words to connect this posting with level two, attributing blame. The notion of identifying a group on which to not only place blame for a particular situation, but as a target for an individual's own aggression, is the backbone of this level formation. Ironman1 articulates the idea that the high-level government officials such as the Secretary of Defence are weak and ineffective due to the fact that they are "just errand boys" and under the control of other entities. The reason Ironman1 attributes for these shortcomings, is not as a result of the individual who holds the office, but instead, the President, who, in turn, is the puppet to Jewish-held interest groups, i.e., ZOG (Zionist Occupation Government).

The notion that Ironman1 puts forth about the power of the position and who truly controls the Secretary of Defense has strong links to laying blame, however, it also

demonstrates the concept of a warped interpretation of the world, which is another of the elements grouped in this level. How Ironman1 chooses to verbally construct his world view is clearly in line with racist skinhead ideology. Essentially, Ironman1 is saying that he believes the true democratic process of the United States is secretly being controlled from behind the scenes by Jewish-based organizations and that those appointed to office are nothing more than figureheads, compliant puppets to the President, who himself, does not represent the interests of the American people but that of controlling Jewish powers.

Kentucky Headhunter also provides clear examples of level two (attributing blame) in his contribution to a thread titled “Rick Perry To Drop Out, Ron Paul To Be Mitt Romney’s Rival.” Dated September 27, 2011, the post is in reference to a video described as showing former presidential candidate Rick Perry dancing with a group of rabbis. At the time of this analysis, the video had been removed. Here is what Kentucky Headhunter posted:

Nothing sickens me more then watching American politicians flat out groveling toward the Jews. It shames me that these so called leaders make fools of themselves and demean our nation when they parade around with their zog masters.

We can link this to level two as the structure of the statement clearly demonstrates that Kentucky Headhunter singles out a group he deems liable for what he sees as an unjust situation. Here, Kentucky Headhunter rages on about the behaviour of American politicians, and it is evident that he considers their conduct to be disgusting and shameful. Kentucky Headhunter places that blame squarely on the Jews and he says as much, accusing politicians of “groveling [sic] toward the Jews” and labelling them as the “zog masters” of American politicians.

Another element of attributing blame that emerges from the language is that of a slanted or twisted worldview. This concept relates to the distortion of an individual's ability to understand the world, by and large leading them to see particular situations or events with a perspective which is extremely unbalanced. As we have seen, within the far-right extremist movement of which skinheads are a part, one of the common factors in these ideologies is the notion of vast conspiracies. Kentucky Headhunter articulates this idea in his discourse with phrases such as "so called leaders make fools of themselves and demean our nation when they parade around with their zog masters." Here Kentucky Headhunter is explicitly implying that the true power behind the American government is not in fact with those elected to represent the citizens of the United States, but instead, a select group of Jews governing the affairs of the country by controlling its politicians.

In considering one of Kentucky Headhunter's most recent posts, we start to see some interesting things emerge from Kentucky Headhunter's participation. The first example to consider came from a thread that was discussing an incident from Norway in which a television anchorwoman was suspended from her job because she had worn a crucifix while on the air. Here is what Kentucky Headhunter posted on November 18, 2013, as part of a thread labelled "Norwegian public television suspends popular anchorwoman for tiny crucifix necklace":

Christians, unless they are of the Zionist, Israel is the greatest, and Jews are the chosen ones sect, are probably, along with white nationalist, the most hated and persecuted group in the United States and Europe. It has become open season on us. Tolerance for all except these two groups. But we all know who's behind it all. Muslims are empowered by Jews in the western lands. You know why they push for Muslims from the Middle East to immigrate to the West? So the Zionist can

create their greater Israel. Make the Arab populations smaller and the Jews can grab all they want because of their technology they stole from the West and their nuclear capabilities. It's why they are so dead set against Iran, probably the only country over there that could give the Jews a run for their money in a conventional war. Jews hate Christianity because it represents all that is good and merciful, where the Talmud is nothing more than a blueprint for evil and repression of goyim. We are engaged in a holy and the consequences are dire if we lose.

Because of the detail and length of this posting, many links can be drawn, and to multiple categories, however, by staying true to the overall conditions I set out to conduct this analysis, the main one represented here is attributing blame. The concept of a skewed perspective, which is central to level two, is the most evident theme in Kentucky Headhunter's discourse. This is very well vocalized by Kentucky Headhunter with regard to what he perceives as the plight of Christians in the world. He sees Christians as a group beset from all sides and, with the exception of white nationalists, the group that is most discriminated against worldwide. Kentucky Headhunter expresses this when he proclaims that Christians are "the most hated and persecuted group in the United States and Europe" and that it is "open season" on them.

He goes on further and in great detail to spin conspiracy after conspiracy to bolster his claims. Take, for example, the numerous exasperated phrases used by Kentucky Headhunter as he declares his personal insight into the actions of the Jewish people and how he knows, without doubt, the Jews are manipulating world affairs to their benefit and at great cost to others, namely American Christians. My higher-order level of attributing blame encompasses steps in the radicalization process which describe stages where an individual constructs points of view that are not rooted in reality, but are more geared

toward producing a scapegoat than they are to offering any real understanding of world affairs. Kentucky Headhunter epitomizes this stage with statements such as the “Talmud is nothing more than a blueprint for evil and repression” or his final warning: “We are engaged in a holy [war] and the consequences are dire if we lose.”

We also see traces of blame and attribution within the post, another element central to the attributing blame level. It is quite clear that Kentucky Headhunter believes the cause of the discrimination and persecution of Christians lies solely with the Jewish people. Statements such as “Jews hate Christianity because it represents all that is good and merciful,” paint a fairly transparent picture of who Kentucky Headhunter assigns responsibility to. Kentucky Headhunter attributes a lack of tolerance toward Christians to the Jews by saying “but we all know who’s behind it all,” then recites a laundry list of cunning and devious actions the Jews have taken to undermine Christianity in the West.

Another example provided by Kentucky Headhunter is found in a posting which is in response to a thread discussing a treaty in the process of being negotiated. The issue at hand was, according to the original post of the thread, is that the details of the negotiations were not being made public, they were occurring in secret. The discussion was titled “Trans Pacific Partnership Treaty Secretly Under Negotiation Would Trample Individual Rights/Freedom Of Expression.” The following is what Kentucky Headhunter had to say:

Unfortunately, the American people choose to remain willingly ignorant about the true motivations of their “elected” leaders. Instead of holding their government accountable, they would rather spend their weekends watching negroes run up and down on a field or watch them throw a ball throw a hoop. They would rather watch some Disney whore smoke a joint on stage then to

critically think about the degradation and sodomy that the Jew shoves down our throats. Instead of learning how to use a real firearm to defend yourself and loved ones, they get you hooked on a video game to pacify the warrior that lurks in every honorable mans head.

Globalization and the inevitable slavery that accompanies this Jew parasitic system is the NWO that the Fabian societies promised the world. Their utopia is our enslavement. They speak of a brotherhood of man, but your not invited to partake in this heaven on earth. They tell us what they plan to do to mock us (that is a trademark of luciferians) but go about in their little cabal of alphabet soup organizations and treaties and hide the details.

Am I surprised to see another treaty that gives up more of our sovereignty? No, I am not. What I am surprised about is the passivity that we are allowing these financial and war criminals to go about their little satanic scheme. Seems like I used to remember reading of bold American men and women who would of shut this plan down a long time ago. Now we have brave homo's discussing how coming out of the closet took so much courage. I'm beginning to think that maybe we deserve everything that has and will happen. Maybe this is God's justice for becoming the people we've become. Apologies for the rant, I just can't stand this crap anymore.

As with the previous post, all contributions analyzed from Kentucky Headhunter's most recent activity are much more comprehensive. Therefore, there is a great deal to pull from his statements and to connect to radicalization models, yet here again we see a distinct level emerge. Attributing blame is representative of all the concepts of radicalization theories which describe a false interpretation of the world, one that is shaped by the group's extremist ideologies. We see the very essence of this by pointing to several phrases in Kentucky Headhunter's post that use language to construct how he sees the world and who he deems responsible for his sense of discontentment, which in this instance are the Jews.

Obvious negative references to Jewish faith abound, such as "they speak of a brotherhood of man, but your [sic] not invited to partake in this heaven on earth" and "that

is a trademark of luciferians [sic].” Kentucky Headhunter goes on to describe how those involved with drafting treaties are engaging in a “little satanic scheme” and he reflects “maybe this is God’s justice” for their (the American people) passivity and indifference towards the issue. The language of the posting is laced with racist undertones that make clear Kentucky Headhunter’s use of the skinhead movement beliefs system to shape his world view.

Kentucky Headhunter goes on to talk about how “the American people choose to remain willingly ignorant about the true motivations of their ‘elected’ leaders” and seethes about how the average American citizen would rather do any number of superficial and irrelevant things than take the time to “critically think about the degradation and sodomy that the Jew shoves down our throats.” He frames the Jews as the group responsible for the underhanded and unfair treaties being created, “the inevitable slavery that accompanies this Jew parasitic system” a notion clearly defined in the formation of level two: placing culpability on a particular group. One statement that acutely demonstrates this concept better than the others is when Kentucky Headhunter declares “Their [the Jew’s] utopia is our enslavement.”

This next post under level two comes from Lone Guard and his ‘mid-range’ data set. It was in response to a discussion thread examining a news report from the *Associated Press*. It described a rash of attacks by young people on innocent bystanders. The attacks were not linked to any perceivable motivations, such as revenge, robbery, or gang-related violence, but were, instead, named as a brutal type of game. The thread, called “New ‘game’ for

“Youths” looked at how the media reported these events. Lone Guard commented as follows:

Notice how the judenpresse brainwashes the sheeple by calling black on white assaults a game. But when it comes to white on black assaults it's a horrendous hate crime, even when defending your loved ones.

The media is your enemy folks. They decide what is politically correct, what is right and wrong, who gets elected, who gets prosecuted for crimes, who gets to invade the country and who we go to war with.

Links can be made here to attributing blame. Ideas of assigning blame and the displacement of hostility, two of the three main elements found in this level are demonstrated within the dialogue by phrases like “calling black on white assaults a game” and “when it comes to white on black assaults it's a horrendous hate crime.” Lone Guard's attitude is that whites are unfairly treated by the media, when compared to African-Americans, who, he feels, are given more latitude for no other reason than political correctness. Lone Guard clearly places the responsibility for the inequality of treatment between whites and African-Americans by the press on the Jewish people. The fact that Lone Guard singles out a particular group responsible and does not simply see this as an unjust situation in general justifies its inclusion in the second level as opposed to the first.

Furthermore, phrases “judenpresse brainwashes the sheeple” and “the media is your enemy folks” demonstrate an extremely distorted view of the world, the third of the key concepts in attributing blame. Lone Guard asserts the media is controlled by the Jews, so inequality in media coverage is the fault of the Jews. At the same time, and despite his prejudices, Lone Guard, covertly, calls on both blacks and whites (folks) to stand against the

all-pervasive Jewish-controlled media: “us against them” where “them” is the greater of two evils.

Finally, I will analyse one of the more recent posts from Lone Guard during his time with Stormfront. The post was written on January 28, 2013, and was part of a thread titled “Farrakhan: Right to bear arms is an outdated concept.” The thread discussed a statement made by a leading member of a predominately African-American religious organization, who believed that the Second Amendment was no longer relevant to the realities of modern life. Here is Lone Guard’s take on Reverend Farrakhan’s statement:

Yeah, he only says that because blacks are being spoiled by Obama and Whites are being destroyed by Jews and Negros.

When Lone Guard implies that the state of African-Americans in the United States is more desirable than that of whites and the reason for this state of affairs is because of “Jews and Negros” he demonstrates the stages of the radicalization process grouped under the second level, attributing blame. While Lone Guard clearly displays a sense of outrage regarding Reverend Farrakhan’s words related to the Second Amendment, it is the fact that he identifies groups responsible for this state of affairs that makes the inclusion of this post within the attributing blame level appropriate.

When he goes on to give the reason for this situation, that African-Americans have an unfair advantage under the Obama administration—“blacks are being spoiled by Obama”—he again demonstrates an example of attributing responsibility but he also articulates how distorted his world view is by his chosen ideology. When he says “Whites are being

destroyed by Jews and Negroes,” he has indicated a move toward interpreting world affairs in a skewed manner, subscribing to a conspiracy-type understanding, a common enough theme within the far-right movement as we have seen. His perspective is one of an attack on the white race by members of the Jewish and African-American communities and, presumably, both groups protected by the Obama administration.

5.5 Level Three: Adopting Ideologies

With regard to level three, adopting ideologies, in the following section I will be providing examples of language which I believe demonstrate the various concepts of radicalization I elected to organize into this grouping. This level includes all elements of radicalization which represent the moment when a subject fully embraces extremist philosophies as a framework in which to understand their experiences. Statements which fall under adopting ideologies include notions of the demonization of a particular group or individual, a deeper engagement within the extremist discourse, an amalgamation of personal beliefs with extremist ones and a full acceptance of extremist group goals and objectives on an intellectual level.

A good example of level three can be found from an Ironamn1 post dated March 4, 2007, that came from his ‘oldest posts’ data set. It was in reference to a thread titled “This story makes me sick,” which relates to a report that claims a foreign exchange student pursuing a medical degree at Martin Luther King Hospital in California (that Ironman1 refers to as “Killer King”), cut the hand of a cadaver and attempted to give it to an exotic dancer with which he was familiar. The posting reads as follows:

I thought CA had shut down “Killer King”. It has been a prime example of the third-world taking over the US, or alternatively, what happens when you give medical licenses to primates.

There is evidence of a number of different radicalization stages which appear later in the frameworks in the above text and fall under the level three: adopting ideologies. Here, any and all stages of the radicalization process which define the moments when an individual comes to wholly accept radical thinking and/or fully becomes a member of a radicalized group are represented. Links to this level can be seen when considering the notion of how Ironman1 applies a particular lens through which he understands the world around them.

This lens is greatly skewed, creating a perspective that cannot be supported by any real evidence. Instead, the subject wholly bases his interpretation of events through the very specific framework of the organization, whose ideologies he has come to accept as absolute truth. Ironman1’s phrase “prime example of the third-world taking over the US” exemplifies the notion quite nicely. Here, he does not consider this incident from any other perspective but that of a white supremacist skinhead. Racism is first and foremost in how Ironman1 constructs his understanding of this particular event. He does not see the attempt to give a cadaver’s hand as a present as an act of a disturbed individual, whose ethnic background, more than likely, has little, or nothing, to do with how that individual behaved. Instead, Ironman1 uses the incident to bolster his belief that this type of act is to be expected of people from non-white cultures.

Another important aspect of the adopting ideologies level is the application of terms which dehumanize members of target groups. This element is arguably the easiest to

identify and justify when considering the online discourse. Ironman1 clearly demonstrates this in the overall tone of the post and specifically when he equates the ethnicity of the exchange student to that of a primate, i.e., less than human: this is “what happens when you give medical licenses to primates.” Through Ironman1’s use of extremely derogatory language in describing the foreign exchange student, as well as the hospital in which he worked at, we see that he feels the reason something like this could even happen in the first place is due to the inferiority of non-white ethnicities and that it is these ethnic groups, as a whole, that are responsible. As is often seen in skinheads who are in the later stages of the radicalization process, the framing of target groups as no longer completely human or undeserving the same rights and respect as other humans makes violence against them become much more reconcilable.

The next post, again from Ironman1, dated June 9, 2008, and found within his ‘mid-range’ participation on Stromfront was labelled “14 killings in L.A. over weekend greater than county’s 2 or 3 a day” exchanged varying opinions as to the reasons behind the massive spike in homicides during this particular period in question. Ironman1 provides his own viewpoint here:

In reality, probably most of the mestizo gangbangers in LA are legal, second generation filth.

While short in dialogue, this post is significant because it is a strong representation of level three, adopting ideologies. As previously mentioned, one of the aspects of this level is the stereotyping and vilification of certain groups. Here, Ironman1 brands *mestizos* (a slang term for individuals of Hispanic ethnicity), as second-generation filth. In doing so, Ironman1

creates conditions that allow him to view Hispanics as lesser—as inferior—and any subsequent acts of aggression or harm toward them will be acceptable.

In addition, Ironman1 is making obvious generalizations without the benefit of any type of evidence to bolster his opinions or back up his claims. Instead, his statements are simply ‘towing the party line’ and re-framing his narrative to align with the prime tenants of the skinhead ideology, one of anti-immigrant and racist viewpoints.

The first of Lone Guard’s oldest posts that I considered for level three was one written on February 17, 2010, in response to a discussion titled “NYT: President of Sephardic Jews in Dominican Rep. accused of trafficking.” The *New York Times* reported that a Jewish leader had been caught trafficking in human organs and body parts. Lone Guard’s contribution to this thread was:

Now we know why there is such a discrepancy between the number of earthquake victims claimed killed and the number of victims actually buried. The filthy Jews scrambled down there like a horde of cockroaches to harvest body organs.

I wonder if dark meat qualifies as being kosher?

This language Lone Guard uses in this particular post to frame his statement reveals connections to notions of stereotyping and dehumanization which are fairly clear. Statements such as “the filthy Jews scrambled down there like a horde of cockroaches” are shockingly overt and frame Jews in a way that certainly degrades and dehumanizes them. Comparing Jews to cockroaches and implying that they are unclean, verbalizing them as pests or vermin, removes any traces of their humanity. One would not lose much sleep over

killing a cockroach that has infested your home, in fact, most would see it as a necessity, and that is precisely the rationalization Lone Guard is making.

Less overt, but still inherent in the discourse, is Lone Guard's choice of phrases "I wonder if dark meat qualifies as being kosher?" when describing native citizens of the Dominican Republic. By classifying them as literally 'pieces of meat' they lose all humanity, essentially being, at least as far as Lone Guard is concerned, equal in deserving of rights and respect as livestock. This idea of dehumanization is central to adopting ideologies but this post also contains an additional link to this level, that of the alignment of beliefs and opinions to that of the extremist ideology and fully considering oneself as a member of the group first and foremost. By attributing some perceived "discrepancy between the number of earthquake victims claimed killed and the number of victims actually buried" Lone Guard adopts a standpoint through his discourse which frames this event with a twisted comprehension of what actually occurred and he now sees the world solely through the lens provided by the racist skinhead movement, fully accepting that belief system as the truth.

Another statement from Lone Guard's time as a member of Stromfront and found as part of his 'oldest posts' data group is one he submitted on March 02, 2010. The discussion thread it belongs to was labelled "TNB at the Chicken Hut" and dealt with the issue of African-Americans and their relationship with the police. The acronym TNB is computer slang for "there's nothing better." Lone Guard's opinion on the subject is:

The reason no black will talk to the police is because they are all wanted by the law for one crime or another.

Not long ago some Negro's house got burglarized and his neighbour called the cops. The man came home before the cops got there and started shooting at the cops when they showed up, thinking they were after him. That's your average Negro a savage criminal with an IQ of 70.

Really only one level can reasonably apply to this post, that of adopting ideologies. As previously mentioned during the discussion of other posts, this level revolves around two main concepts, the utilization of extremist ideologies in which to frame an individual's understanding of the world and the vilification of those an individual views as the enemy according to the principals of their chosen beliefs. Lone Guard vilifies African-Americans by portraying them as stereotypes. In his posting, he states that the main cause for the lack of communication between blacks and law enforcement is that "they [blacks] are all wanted by the law for one crime or another." He relates a story involving an African-American male who, even though is the victim of a crime, opens fire on the responding officers, because, according to Lone Guard, blacks are all criminals and automatically assume the police would be after them.

Lone Guard degrades African-Americans further by making the blanket statement, "That's your average Negro a savage criminal with an IQ of 70." This conceptualization of African-Americans places them in a less than flattering light. It characterizes an entire group as little better than wild animals, or should I say, dangerous wild animals, out of control and lacking the capacity to live in a civilized manner. The construction of this post through Lone Guard's specific use of particular terms and concepts also demonstrates an acceptance of the racist skinhead ideologies in how he presents his ideas. If the target is already vile, or

appalling, and their behaviour merits that extreme action to be taken against them, then the sense of rationalization that this brings about goes a long way to alleviate any feelings of culpability.

5.6 Level Four: Mobilization to Violence

In this final section I will analyse several examples which I feel articulate the last of my higher-order levels: mobilization to violence. This level consists of any and all aspects which describe the full radicalization of the individual. This is demonstrated in statements which include any and all language that advocates or incites violence, along with a complete acceptance of violence as a viable means in which to further or achieve the objectives of a particular extremist ideology.

A posting made by Ironman1, drawn from his most recent data set was part of the “Marines had to take the bolts out of their rifles for Obama’s 2nd inauguration parade—Has this ever happened before” discussion thread from February 10, 2013. In any firearm, such as the rifles used by Marine honor guards, the bolt is an essential component that allows the weapon to fire a round: without it, a rifle will not function. The reason for this action is, presumably, one of security: a fear that members of the Marine Corps honour guard might pose a threat, intentionally or not, to the President during the inauguration ceremonies.

Ironman1 comments as follows:

The USA is very close to becoming a banana/tortilla republic. Have a third-worlder as “President”, it only seems logical that extra-Constitutional means are used to depose him.

This post is particularly interesting because it is demonstrative of the fourth and final level: mobilization to violence. Again, in reviewing the post, there is without question some connection to level three in that there is certainly terms and key words which attempt to dehumanize the President. This is certainly evident in Ironman1's statement, describing President Obama as a "third-worlder" meant as an obvious insult. Labelling Obama this way, despite the fact that he was born in the United States and is obviously a full citizen, allows Ironman1 to remove himself from any possible connection or association to the President. Furthermore, one could argue that when Ironman1 says his country is becoming a "banana/tortilla republic," very derogatory terms, it is as a result of having Obama in office.

Yet, it is this process of vilification and dehumanization that enables individuals to, not only contemplate the use of violence, but carry it out as well. Therefore, it is not a stretch in logic to assume that when a subject would be contemplating, advocating or planning violence through communications and discussions within the online environment, these types of description and terms would be natural within their discourse. Ironman1 portrays the President as the culprit of what he sees as the decline of the United States and, as such, the President is deserving of any violence directed toward him.

Thus, I decided that this post is more representative of the notion of mobilization to violence, a level that includes all the stages of radicalization which denotes actual planning, advocating or inciting violent activity in the name of a specific extremist ideology. When subjects find themselves at this point in the process, violence is not only an acceptable response, but a distinct possibility. They have now fully transformed from disgruntled and

frustrated individuals looking for reasons to explain their life situation to motivated, fanatical true believers ready and willing to carry out all kinds of brutal and extreme actions in the name of their beliefs.

In the above post, we see a clear example of Ironman1's comfort and advocacy of violence as a solution to what he views as the poor state of America. Ironman1's comment that "extra-Constitutional means" are an option to "depose of" President Obama from office, in the context this discussion, is clearly a reference to the use of violence. The implication is that one of the Marines serving in the Presidential honor guard should take it upon him- or herself to assassinate the Commander-in-Chief, an excellent verbal construction of direct aggression toward the target group or individual.

The next discussion thread titled "This is Chicago. Chicago Youth Terrorizing People," was in reference to a video found through a link posted to the discussion. The video has been deleted, but based on the description that was given it showed groups of African-American youth participating in violent and disorderly actions against others. Kentucky Headhunter's contribution, found among his mid-range data set, to the discussion, posted August 27, 2012, was as follows:

Watching that video kinda makes you want to drop a neutron bomb on that area of town. It would be like a big bug zapper for Chicago. Best part is there would be minimum reconstruction.

In Kentucky Headhunter's statement, we see how he dehumanizes the target group by describing the citizens who live in that area of Chicago as bugs, attributing the same value to their lives as he would to the lives of insects. And, he goes a step further by commenting on the

already-depressed state of the neighbourhood, in that the dropping of a neutron bomb would not change the neighbourhood's make up in any recognizable or significant way. Through Kentucky Headhunter's choice of words, he has portrayed African-Americans as inferior, as blight on the city of Chicago, living in and/or having created a slum—little better than an infestation.

While this aspect of the discourse is more in line with level three, that of adopting ideologies, if we delve a bit further, we can see that the more present concepts in Kentucky Headhunter's choice of language is violent mobilization. Through very strong statements such as “kinda makes you want to drop a neutron bomb on that area” and “would be like a big bug zapper for Chicago” he is both explicitly and implicitly advocating the use of violence against his targeted group. As we have seen in other posts, it is logical to see the dehumanization of potential victims in the discourse when supporting the notion of violent acts as a response to a situation.

These verbal characterizations of, in this case, African-Americans, allows Kentucky Headhunter to construct a narrative which makes the thought of committing acts of violence against them much easier to justify and far more palatable. If an individual views a group as less than human and undeserving of the same rights and privileges that they themselves feel entitled to, they allow themselves to believe that any violence or harm perpetrated against said group is not morally wrong or, at the very least, admissible. By saying that this group has no more value than that of bugs and by implying, at the same

time, that they live in deplorable conditions of their own making, Kentucky Headhunter rationalizes that their extermination would, in fact, be a positive for the City of Chicago.

The objectives of my analysis were to organize various postings found on Stormfront.org and determine if this type of online social interaction between a group of individuals who are associated with extremist ideologies demonstrated any evidence of radicalization. First, did the language used by avatars contain radical concepts, notions or statements and second, did these verbal constructs represent stages of the radicalization process as defined by my higher-order categories. Through the identification of connections between elements of the discourse in the form of words, terms and phrases and my re-grouping of the different stages of several leading theories on the radicalization process, an effort was made to determine if this online representation copies what is conceived of in actual face-to-face relationships between these same types of individuals.

The analysis clearly demonstrated that examples of radical discourse are indeed present within the dialogue used by my selected avatars. These radical statements do appear to have clear and defined connections between what is framed in the online discussions and my higher-order categories. Having said that, in response to my second research questions, there does not appear to be any similarities between the progression of my higher-order categories which are organized to represent the evolution of a questioning individual to radical extremist and how the discourse unfolds in the virtual world over time. Avatars did not demonstrate any specific structure or pattern in how they moved through the various categories by how they constructed their ideas through the use of language.

6.0 CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that the virtual world has become as important to human interaction in the 21st century as has the real world. With the ongoing explosion of new technologies, applications and websites designed to cater to purely social and/or networking pursuits, what was once barriers of time and space are no longer applicable. Such barriers are constantly being broken down; individuals from opposite sides of the world can now connect, share ideas, exchange information and form ties as strong (if not stronger) as if those ties were being formed face-to-face. While this technological revolution opens up some amazing possibilities, it also raises some troubling ones. The ease with which the dissemination of information can occur today supports, not only benign activities, but radical and extreme ones as well.

Though the scope of my research was relatively small and did not consider external factors and influences which may, or may not, have been affecting each avatar at the time, some interesting elements emerged from the results of my study. First, and foremost, is the fact that evidence exists to suggest that key concepts outlined of the various stages of the radicalization process do manifest within the language and dialogue of individuals who engage in discussions online. This is particularly true when considering a website such as Stormfront.org where extremist ideologies and beliefs are not only encouraged by like-minded people but protected in an environment that is relatively free from censorship.

While it is impossible to say whether or not the online rhetoric translates to real world action in terms of a subject evolving from curious individual to violent extremist, it is

significant that the key concepts outlined within my chosen theories do materialize within the dialogue used by each avatar. All higher order categories I developed to represent the radicalization process were present in the discourse and the method in which posting were constructed and conveyed through choices in language mirrored what is to be expected of an individual who is exploring and developing within these types of ideologically driven groups in a real world setting. This lends credibility to the notion that for extremist groups like skinheads, the online environment is simply another method of socialization, and not some type of fantasy world completely detached from the subjects real and true persona.

Yet there was important differences revealed with regard to the overall structure of the radicalization process as described by my chosen theories and how that same process manifested itself online. The common theme among my selected frameworks was that radicalization occurs by moving through a series of steps or stages in a linear fashion, culminating to the eventual total acceptance of violent extremist ideologies. What was exposed during the data analysis was something quite different. Of the participants selected, none of them followed a clear and sequential progression; in fact, what emerged was the opposite. Avatars jumped from different steps throughout their experience online, at times demonstrating stages in their statements found nearer to the end of the radicalization process early on in their participation within the group, and then at other times, stages found at the beginning of the radicalization process, after they had been members for many years.

Two possible conclusions can be drawn from this. First, that the radicalization process as displayed through discourse is extremely organic and does not follow a linear path. Instead, the structure uncovered is more akin to the notion of a collection or accumulation of stages, as if the subject was filling a backpack full of the different steps in the radicalization process as they progressed.² These different steps are then interchangeable and manifest depending on the situation. This was evidenced not only by the lack of a ridged progression by each avatar through the higher-order levels, but also through instances of the appearance of elements belonging to different higher-order levels within the same statement. In other words, an individual who has displayed examples of all stages of the radicalization process within their language may still show examples of earlier stages in certain situations or even multiple stages depending on the subject they are addressing. Because individuals are participating within extremist groups via the Internet, certain pressures to ‘put your money where your mouth is’ do not exist. The online environment allows a subject the freedom to explore, intellectually, aspects of extremist doctrine or thinking without the need for actual physical participation. Thus, an individual may not need the intense indoctrination of a progression of consecutive stages to reach more extreme ways of thinking. Instead, they may feel comfortable enough to jump to and from categories because within the confines of the virtual world there are seemingly no consequences. Yet there is a danger here, as discourse, propaganda and rhetoric are well known to incite others to violent action.

² A special note of thanks to Professor Maritza Felices-Luna for conceiving of and articulating the concept of a ‘backpack’ in understanding and describing stages of radicalization in online discourse.

A second conclusion may be that radicalization within the online discourse is, for the most part, reactive. What I mean by this is, based on the data I collected any of the stages of radicalization found in an avatar's language use was dependent upon the tone and attitude of the discussion thread, and how each avatar reacted to the issues currently under discussion. In addition, issues dealing with violence, or perceived discrimination toward groups which the avatars associated with, elicited responses that scored much higher on the radicalization scales than did issues dealing with generalities or everyday events. Again, aspects of anonymity and absence of any visible repercussions unique to the Internet may provide the necessary sense of security for members to progress to later stages of radicalization in how they verbally construct their personal ideologies.

Acknowledging that the radicalization process as displayed through online communication is not simply a question of "time, plus exposure, equals extremism," but is, instead, a process that fluctuates and responds to external stimuli, we can set about designing strategies and implementing procedures to insure a more focused and efficient use of resources when not only studying this issue, but when attempting to combat it as well. The idea that the radicalization process manifests itself within the online discourse in a non-linear way calls into question the ability to use the Internet as a resource of surveillance and risk assessment. The viability and reliability of any data collected from individuals and their online presence rates extremely low, as the predictability factor is essentially zero. Because the process online fluctuates and is so erratic, it is impossible to determine when an individual might make the leap to violent mobilization or even if their

very discourse is a true representation of their state of being as it is impossible to determine their actual mindset by simply observing the language used in the discussion forums.

Though increased and deliberate surveillance of high risk websites, during or immediately after 'triggering' events which have the capacity to produce strong reactions, may have some merit, by and large it is an inefficient application of resources. Certainly, the Internet, as a medium, is cheap, user-friendly and anonymous and its accessibility is unprecedented, connecting an astronomical amount of people each and every day. Many argue that this creates a fertile breeding ground, where radical ideologies and philosophies flourish, as well as providing a forum that encourages, rationalizes and justifies aggressive and/or brutal acts. However, my findings suggest that this perspective does not in fact represent reality. While there is little doubt that violent radical groups will continue to make more and more use of the Internet in the coming years and further research is definitely warranted, it appears that the capacity to utilize manifestations of radicalization found in the language of the online discourse to gauge the potential for radicalization to violence remains limited for now.

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