



**The author(s) shown below used Federal funding provided by the U.S. Department of Justice to prepare the following resource:**

**Document Title:** Radicalization on the Internet: Virtual Extremism in the U.S. from 2012-2017

**Author(s):** Matthew Costello, Thomas Ratlif, James Hawdon, David Snow, Rebecca Barrett-Fox

**Document Number:** 256036

**Date Received:** January 2021

**Award Number:** 2014-ZA-BX-0014

**This resource has not been published by the U.S. Department of Justice. This resource is being made publically available through the Office of Justice Programs' National Criminal Justice Reference Service.**

**Opinions or points of view expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.**

## **Final Summary Overview**

**Radicalization on the Internet: Virtual Extremism in the U.S. from 2012-2017**

**Award # 2014-ZA-BX-0014**

### **Principal Investigator (August 2016 – present)**

Matthew Costello

Assistant Professor, Clemson University

### **Previous Principal Investigator (January 2015 – August 2016)**

Thomas Ratliff

Associate Professor, University of Pikeville

### **Key Personnel**

James Hawdon

Director, Center for Peace Studies and Violence Prevention, Virginia Tech University

David Snow

Distinguished Professor, University of California, Irvine

Rebecca Barrett-Fox

Assistant Professor, Arkansas State University

### **Graduate Research Assistants**

Colin Bernatzky, Anna Tan, Jessica Middleton, Kelly Mendes, Tolunay Guney, Amanda Cross,  
Tyler Grantham, Ghouthami Veepuri, Jonathan Lloyd Lori Hall

## **Radicalization on the Internet: Virtual Extremism in the U.S. from 2012-2017**

### **I. Purpose of the Project**

In the past 15 years, the United States has focused much of its counterterrorism efforts and policy on international terrorism, but during this same time period, especially in the past decade, the U.S. has also been a victim of domestic extremist attacks (Bjelopera, 2012). The growing concern over homegrown terrorism has been intensified with such attacks as the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City which killed 168, the 2001 anthrax letters which killed five, the 2008 church shooting in Knoxville, TN, and the 2009 death of a security guard and perpetrator at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (Furlow 2012). These attacks were not driven by foreign motivation such as ties to international terror networks but rather instances of violent extremism perpetrated by U.S. citizens in service of their movements' beliefs and/or group's political agenda.

Within this context, the Internet revolutionized social relations by providing tools for instantaneous communication and organization. Penetrating every social institution, it has changed virtually everything that requires human communication, from how we do business to how we meet our potential spouses. As a space for open communication, the Internet enables the formation of civic cultures where individuals express their ideas and opinions to a larger group of like-minded people. Various organized groups from white supremacists to transnational religious terrorist networks are now active on the Internet (Brown 2009). While technology now saturates our societies, research in this area remains limited, yet the rise of social media has opened additional avenues for promoting activism and radicalism and to allow a plethora of hate groups to flourish online (Brown 2009; Chau & Xu 2007; Hawdon 2012).

The purpose of this study was to examine violent domestic extremists—individuals and groups that “support or commit ideologically motivated violence to further political, social, or religious goals” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014:4). Our examination proceeded along two distinct but overlapping methodological paths: (1) we used explanatory models (e.g. online surveys) to assess demographic profiles and other characteristics likely associated with exposure to, targeting by, and/or adoption of extremist ideas via the web, as well as responses to seeing online extremism; and, (2) we used thick description to form a virtual ethnography of extremist profiles to identify the ways different types of extremist groups or individuals use particular Internet functionalities (i.e. YouTube, home pages, blogs, etc.). We believe the output from this study can not only shed light on who is seeing extremist material, but also potentially help authorities and communities identify and counteract radicalization. Thus, our objective was to parse out, catalogue, and analyze how violent domestic extremist groups and individuals use the Internet and what impacts it can have on users, particularly youth and young adults. Specifically, we sought to meet four objectives:

1. Identify active online extremist groups based in the United States.
2. Create “virtual” profiles of a sample of extremist groups operating online.
3. Elaborate the frames of extremist groups operating online.
4. Discern the impact online hate and/or extremist material has on individuals who encounter this material and which types of material is more/less influential.

## **II. Project Methodology**

We used a mixed-methods approach to collect and analyze data for our project. We began the data collection process by randomly sampling a list of hate groups from broad categories of

hate identified by the Southern Poverty Law Center. This allowed our team to create virtual ethnographies of the sampled groups. There is increasing academic interest in virtual ethnography (Hine 2000; Markham 2005; Boellstroff 2010), and we utilized this approach to better understand how hate groups use the Internet to recruit, advertise, spread their message, and raise funds, among other activities. Virtual ethnography involves researchers observing online groups by collecting posted texts, images, music, videos, and posted narratives as a form of non-obtrusive measures.

For each group, we collected information on their stated mission, what they saw as the “problem” they sought to redress (what group of people is to blame), why they placed blame on certain groups for perceived problems, how they framed the perceived problem to their potential audience, their proposed solutions to the perceived problems, tactics they advocated for achieving their goals, the prescience of the perceived problem, how individuals could join the group, and opportunities to interact with members of the group, among other information. This allowed us to gain key insight into how hate groups operate online, and it also informed the creation of online surveys for the second portion of our study.

In addition to the virtual ethnographies, we used online surveys of Internet users aged 15 to 36 to better understand the dynamics of online hate material. Three waves of data, in 2015, 2016, and 2017, were collected from demographically balanced panels of respondents. Each wave of data was collected from approximately 1,000 Internet users over the age of 15 recruited from a demographically balanced panel of Americans who voluntarily agreed to participate in research surveys. Survey Sample International (SSI) administered the panels. SSI’s panels included over 1 million unique member households. Potential panel participants were recruited through random digit dialing, banner ads, and other permission-based techniques. E-mail invitations were sent to a sample of panel members stratified to mirror the U.S. population on age, gender, education level,

and income. The sample quotas were nationally representative on age and gender and will have appropriate regional coverage.

The primary purposes of the survey were to estimate the extent to which people are exposed to, and targeted by, online extremism, examine the types of hate material individuals are exposed to, and discern how they reacted to it. We were also interested in understanding how individuals arrived at the hate material, either deliberately or by some other avenue. Specifically, we collected information on the online routines and habits of individuals. For instance, we asked respondents about their online behaviors, including the number of hours they spend online per day, their social network usage habits, their online social ties, and the number of online friends they engage with. We also asked questions about their exposure to hate material, as well as whether they ever produced online material that might be considered hateful or extreme. Additional questions inquired about reactions to encountering online extremist material. Items designed to measure physical, social and personal guardianship while online and offline were also included. Finally, we collected attitudinal measures and standard demographic information with our surveys, such as race/ethnicity, gender, residence, political beliefs, educational attainment, and work status. This information afforded us the ability to examine a broad array of factors associated with various aspects of online hate material.

### **III Study Results**

The success of this project is largely reflected by the number of deliverables it has produced. To date, this project has resulted in seven manuscripts published in scholarly journals. In addition, three manuscripts are currently under a “revise and resubmit” status at scholarly journals. The research team is also currently engaged in the production of several other manuscripts that should be completed by the end of the calendar year, 2018. Two team members,

James Hawdon and Matthew Costello, are in talks to publish an academic book based on the results from the grant. Moreover, the grant team has given nineteen presentations (four invited) at academic conferences and venues in the United States and abroad, and members are scheduled to give a series of additional presentations in the coming months. This has allowed us to reach a broad audience with our research. A brief overview of the published manuscripts, as well as the ongoing grant work, is detailed below:

### **Published Articles**

1. Costello, Matthew, Rebecca Barrett-Fox, Colin Bernatzky, James Hawdon, and Kelly Mendes. "Predictors of Viewing Online Extremism among America's Youth." *Youth and Society*. DOI: 10.1177/0044118X18768115.

This article examines factors associated with the frequency that youth and young adults, ages 15 to 24, see material online that expresses negative views toward a social group. It utilizes data collected using our online survey methodology. Our analysis controls for variables that approximate online routines, social, political, and economic grievances, and sociodemographic traits. Findings show that spending more time online, using particular social media sites, interacting with close friends online, and espousing political views online all correlate with increased exposure to online hate. Harboring political grievances is likewise associated with seeing hate material online frequently. Finally, whites are more likely than other race/ethnic groups to be exposed to online hate frequently.

2. Costello, Matthew, Joseph Rukus, and James Hawdon. 2018. "We Don't Like Your Type Around Here: Regional and Residential Differences in Exposure to Online Hate Material Targeting Sexuality" *Deviant Behavior*. DOI: 10.1080/01639625.2018.1426266

This study examines factors related to online targeting of hate material based to sexual orientation. Data are drawn from our online surveys. We find that social network usage, online antagonism, informal online social control, and a lack of online anonymity increase the

likelihood of being targeted. Moreover, individuals living in the Southern region of the U.S. are nearly three times as likely to be targeted by hate related to sexual orientation, while those living in rural areas are more than twice as likely to face such targeting.

3. Costello, Matthew and James Hawdon. 2018. "Online Routines, Social Groups Identity, and the Perpetration of Hate." *Violence and Gender*. v5(1).

This study examines factors associated with the production of online hate material using data from our online surveys. Results indicate that men are significantly more likely than women to produce online hate material. Other results show that the use of particular social networking sites, such as Reddit, Tumblr, and general messaging boards, is positively related to the dissemination of hate material online. Counter to expectations, the use of first-person shooter games actually decreased the likelihood of producing hate material online. In addition, we find that individuals who are close to an online community, or spend more time in areas populated by hate, are more inclined to produce hate material. We expected that spending more time online would correlate with the production of hate, but this turned out not to be true. In fact, spending more time online actually reduces the likelihood of doing so.

4. Hawdon, James, Matthew Costello, Thomas Ratliff, Lori Hall and Jessica Middleton. 2017. "Conflict Management Styles and Cybervictimization: Extending Routine Activity Theory." *Sociological Spectrum*. v1: 1-7.

This study asked if online conflict management styles affect the likelihood of cybervictimization. To answer this question, we used our online survey data. Using an extended version of routine activity theory, we examine how two conflict resolution styles – self-help and toleration – affect the target suitability of online users, and, in turn, their likelihood of being the victim of cybercrime. Our findings demonstrate that individuals who adopt the confrontational conflict resolution style of self-help upon witnessing hostile behavior online are at an increased



risk of being victimized. However, tolerating online conflict does not significantly influence the likelihood of victimization, net of other online behaviors and socio-demographic characteristics.

5. Costello, Matthew, James Hawdon and Amanda Cross. 2017. "Virtually Standing Up or Standing By? Correlates of Enacting Social Control Online." *The International Journal of Criminology and Sociology*. v. 6, 16-28.

This study examines the bystander effect in an online setting, focusing on factors that lead individuals to intervene, and therefore enact informal social control, on behalf of others who are being targeted by hate material. To address this question, we used our online survey data. Results demonstrate that the enactment of social control is positively affected by the existence of strong offline and online social bonds, collective efficacy, prior victimization, self-esteem, and an aversion for the hate material in question. Additionally, the amount of time that individuals spend online affects their likelihood of intervention. These findings provide important insights into the processes that underlie informal social control and begin to bridge the gap in knowledge between social control in the physical and virtual realms.

6. Costello, Matthew, James Hawdon, and Thomas Ratliff. 2016. "Confronting Online Extremism: The Effect of Self-Help, Collective Efficacy, and Guardianship on Being a Target for Hate Speech." *Social Science Computer Review*, v35(5), 587-605.

This study analyzes who is likely to be a target of online hate and extremism using our survey data. Our findings highlight how online exposure to hate materials, target suitability, and enacting social control online all influence being the target of hate. Using Social Networking Sites and encountering hate material online have a particularly strong relationship with being targeted, with victim suitability (e.g. discussing private matters online, participating in hate online) and confronting hate also influencing the likelihood of being the target of hate speech.

7. Costello, Matthew, James Hawdon, Thomas Ratliff, and Tyler Grantham. 2016. "Who Views Online Extremism? Individual Attributes Leading to Exposure." *Computers in Human Behavior*. v.63, 311–320.

This study examines who is likely to view materials online maligning groups based on race, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, political views, immigration status, or religion using our online survey data. Our results demonstrate that African-Americans and foreign-born respondents were significantly less likely to be exposed to negative material online, as are younger respondents. Additionally, individuals expressing greater levels of trust in the federal government report significantly less exposure to such materials. Higher levels of education result in increased exposure to negative materials, as does a proclivity towards risk-taking.

### **Manuscripts under a "revise and resubmit status at academic journals"**

1. Bernatzky, Colin, Matthew Costello, and James Hawdon. "Cyber-Routines, Political Attitudes, and Exposure to Violence-Advocating Online Extremism." Revise and Resubmit at *Social Forces*.
2. Costello, Matthew, James Hawdon, Kelly Mendes, and Colin Bernatzky. "Reactions to Online Hate: The Influence of Social Identities and Routines" Revise and Resubmit at *Sociological Inquiry*.
3. Hawdon, James, Matthew Costello, Rebecca Barrett-Fox, and Colin Bernatzky. The Perpetuation of Online Hate: A Criminological Analysis of Factors Associated with Participating in an Online Attack." Under Review at *The Journal of Hate Studies*.

### **Manuscripts in progress**

1. Hawdon, James, Matthew Costello, Colin Bernatzky, and David Snow. "Framing Hate: Themes in the Prognostic, Diagnostic, and Motivational Frames of Various Types of Hate Groups."
2. Hawdon, James and Matthew Costello. "I Hate you Because of Who I Am: Status Relations and Online Extremism."
3. Costello, Matthew, Rebecca Barrett-Fox, and James Hawdon. "Who Trusts the Government?: An Analysis of Social Capital, Online Habits, and Socio-demographics."

4. Costello, Matthew and James Hawdon. "Anti-Immigrant Extremism in the Digital Age."
5. Matthew Costello, James Hawdon, and Colin Bernatzky. Political Partisanship, Discontent, and the Frequency of Seeing Hate Material on Social Media Sites.

### **Book Proposal**

James Hawdon and Matthew Costello are in talks with Lexington Books, an imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, to publish a book that provides an overview of the findings from this grant. This book will focus on how individuals find hate material online, and the reasons why it is becoming increasingly pervasive. We will submit the book proposal by the end of September, 2018. This book is going to be written primarily for academic audiences, and we hope that it will be utilized in both undergraduate and graduate level college courses.

In sum, I believe that the grant team met the four original goals outlined in the proposal. We created a coding scheme to identify the key attributes of online hate groups, addressing the first stated goal. We then applied that coding scheme to a random sample of online hate groups spanning numerous categories of hate. This addressed the second and third goals. We also collected three rounds of online survey data (in 2015, 2016, and 2017) asking respondents about their experiences with online hate. This addressed the fourth goal of the grant. In meeting these goals, I believe the grant has produced information that is useful to both criminal justice practitioners, as well as ordinary citizens. Our work was able to identify patterns of behavior that correlate with seeing online hate, being targeted by it, and producing it. Understanding this is foundational to understanding the radicalization process, which is increasingly occurring in online settings. Additionally, by identifying risk factors associated with encountering hate material online, we hope that laypersons will be able to find effective avenues to avoid such content, in turn eschewing its harmful effects.