

SUMMARY REPORT OF THE STUDENT STRATEGY & SECURITY SOCIETY'S TALK:

EXTREMIST VIOLENCE: THE ONLINE SUBCULTURES OF
THE FAR-RIGHT AND INCELS WITH DR LEWYS BRACE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The University of Glasgow's Student Strategy & Security Society invited Dr Lewys Brace for a discussion on the changing nature of extremist violence with a focus on online subcultures of the far-right and incels. In the first half of this talk, Dr Brace highlighted his findings and recommendations from the Minechans project, which mapped the visual and linguistic landscape of various 'chans' populated by the far-right in order to understand their radicalising impacts. In the second half, Dr Brace outlined his ongoing project on the incel subculture, an online community of men who define themselves by their inability to access sexual relationships with women. Following the Plymouth attack, incels are having an increasingly radical effect, both online and offline and Dr Brace dissected their ideology, examined their misogynistic nature and situated it as a supremacist and extremist movement. Lastly, the audience asked a series of questions on the organisation of far-right extremist groups, the nature of the incel movement and how the government should approach it.

BACKGROUND

Dr Lewys Brace graduated with a BSc in Police Studies followed by a Masters in Social and Cultural Research Methods eventually completing a PhD in Complex Systems Simulation at the University of Southampton. He is now a lecturer in Data Analysis within the Politics department at the University of Exeter, where he focuses on online extremism and radicalisation. Dr Brace is also a Turing fellow at the Alan Turing Institute, currently focusing on behaviours related to far-right and incel subculture.

PART I

THE FAR-RIGHT

THE CHANGING NATURE OF EXTREMIST VIOLENCE: THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET

Dr Brace began his talk by highlighting a shift in the nature of extremist violence seen in recent years. Although we still see highly organised extremist groups, they are slowly being outmatched by individuals who have been radicalised online, which sometimes escalates into offline violence. One of the first examples of this was the 2015 Nice attack but perhaps more notably the far-right Christchurch attack in 2019. Ever since, Dr Brace noted that we have seen more cases of this type of self-organised, lone-actor extremism, indicative of wider changes in extremist violence.

“MAKING TERROR FUN”

The internet appears to be largely responsible for this change by allowing for unprecedented access and distribution of extremist material. Before social media and the internet of today, extremist propaganda was centrally organised. Now we are increasingly seeing a self-organised generation and distribution of extremist material. Using the example of ISIS, Dr Brace explained how they figured out early on how to use online propaganda based on popular culture, irony and memes, which appeals to a younger audience. Dr Brace refers to this worrying trend as “making terror fun”. This means that young people are baited with less extreme material, often cloaked in humour, to then be confronted with more extreme xenophobic, misogynist or racist material content. Relatedly, Dr Brace noted that this has been followed by increasing numbers of young people being convicted with terrorism related offences, notably seen in the UK.

ONLINE SUBCULTURES OF THE FAR-RIGHT: THE MINECHANS PROJECT

Introducing the section with the infamous Pepe the Frog meme, Dr Brace examined the nature of the online subcultures of the far-right by highlighting his research of various ‘chans’: a family of anonymous messaging boards used by the far-right such as 4chan, 8chan and nainchan. Dr Brace and his colleagues started the Minechans project with the aim of mapping the visual and linguistic landscape of the various chans in order to understand their radicalising impacts. The Minechans project got funded because law enforcement were struggling to take down these extreme sites, where once a website was taken down, others would spring up in its place - something Dr Brace referred to as the ‘hydra effect’. This is partially due to the structural architecture of these extremist websites, which are very simple to reproduce. Dr Brace pointed out that the chans are particularly important as they act as microcosms of the sensibilities of the wider far-right ecosystem.

FINDINGS

1) A three-tiered hierarchy

Dr Brace and his colleagues found that the content on the chans exists in a 'three-tiered hierarchy', with more popular chans like 4chan on one end hosting less extreme content, followed by 8chan and 8kun in the middle and websites like nainchan (which exists solely on the dark web) at the other end hosting extreme content like shooting manifestos. This three-tiered hierarchy also applied to the external domains linked on the chans in which the less popular and more extremist boards like nainchan contain more extreme, contentious material. In this way, the chans act as gateways to the larger far-right online ecosystem.

2) A three-tiered gateway

From this, Dr Brace and his colleagues drew two major conclusions. First, these far-right chans constitute hubs for extremist discussions that create a sense of community through shared norms, language and culture. Second, they act as platforms where individuals and groups can 'bait' others into extremist content. This is not necessarily with the active intention of radicalising others, but rather happens organically as they immerse themselves in the far-right subculture. Dr Brace described this as problematic since we know from radicalisation research that when individuals with similar views talk to one another, they tend to form an 'echo chamber'. If external influences are removed, such as the severing of ties to friends and families, these individuals can then be further radicalised. Covid-19 lockdowns may exacerbate this development with more young people isolating themselves online. Dr Brace suggested that this may be why we are seeing more young people prosecuted with terrorism related offences, while stressing that one should be careful of drawing simplistic causal links as we lack robust empirical data on it.

3) A far-right ecosystem

Dr Brace found that this hierarchy of extremist content and linkages are not reserved to the chans but exist throughout the far-right. The far-right is not dominated by one ideology, but is instead a conglomeration of various groups like the alt-right, neo nazis and milita groups. Albeit different, Dr Brace argued that "they all draw from a similar hinterland". Building onto this, Dr Brace and his colleagues used the metaphor the 'far-right ecosystem' with different individual domains linked together via hyperlinks, forming communities. These communities then form larger biotypes characterised by ideological themes. The biotypes overlap, which Dr Brace likened to the Olympic logo of overlapping venn diagrams. Together they form an intricate far-right ecosystem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations Dr Brace laid out from the Minechan project were as follows :

1. Every entity should not be given the same amount of attention by law enforcement and security practitioners.
2. Not all of these extremist platforms should be shut down. Although it may seem counterintuitive, Dr Brace suggested that since the chans act as a gateway to the wider far-right online ecosystem, it may be worth leaving them be and instead monitoring their activity and preventing migration to more extreme platforms.

3. Traditional tactics to counter extremist content like generating counter-narratives are ineffective. Dr Brace described the reason for this as two-fold. First, anyone who shares views that diverge from the norm of these extremist platforms is discredited and accused of working for law enforcement. Second, extremist groups focus on 'source credibility' whereby material has to come from sources already trusted by the community. If this is not the case it is denied outright. In the words of Dr Brace: "if you're not trusted by the community, it's not going to trust your narratives". Using the US Department of Homeland Security operation to counter ISIS' propaganda as an example, Dr Brace illustrated the failure of producing counter-narratives in an ever-evolving online environment. ISIS were trying to appeal to young people and thus had young people creating their propaganda to better reach the target audience. The US created counter-narratives that failed to appreciate this aspect of ISIS propaganda by creating counter-narratives that appealed to an older audience, created by older people themselves. Overall, the operation failed and Dr Brace used it as indicative of the likely failure of producing counter-narratives to combat extremism on the chans.

PART III

THE ONLINE SUBCULTURE OF THE INCELS

Despite their odd nature, Dr Brace argued that the incel movement is worth looking into for four reasons:

1. It is an ideology that is increasingly present online.
2. It is having an increasing radical effect as we are seeing more violent attacks motivated by incel ideology.
3. The incel subculture is “amorphous and still evolving” and we will see more discussions on whether it is an extremist and/or terrorist ideology in the near future. In the wake of the Plymouth Attack in August 2021, where self-proclaimed incel Jake Davison shot 5 people, the UK is still grappling with this question.
4. Incels are part of the overlapping far-right ecosystem.

WHO ARE THE INCELS?

Incels, a portmanteau for involuntary celibates, are an “online community who define themselves by their inability to either form or access sexual relationships with women”. Dr Brace pointed out that in terms of demographics, incels tend to be predominantly young, white men. He stressed the word ‘predominantly’ as there are some studies and polls on incel websites that suggest that incels are ethnically diverse, however most material point toward an estimate of 40-50 % white men. Given that the majority of violent attacks committed by incels have happened on American or Canadian soil, Dr Brace argued that incels have originally been seen as a “purely North American and Canadian issue” but have been exported to Europe in recent years. Dr Brace highlighted two trials in 2020 of men with links to the incel movement: Gabrielle Friel and Anwar Driouich, as well as the Plymouth attack to highlight the prevalence of the incel movement in the UK.

INCEL IDEOLOGY

According to Dr Brace, “the incel ideology is, at its core, a very misogynistic one” and grounded in the notion that attractiveness is based on genetic factors. This is drawn from ‘lookism theory’, which dictates that unless you have the genetic factors deemed to be attractive, you will never be attractive to women and are thus destined to a life of loneliness. Incel ideology is further based on a social hierarchy with Chads (attractive men) and Stacys (attractive women) at the top constituting a group of Alphas, normies (average looking people) as betas in the middle and incels at the very bottom.

INCELS AND MISOGYNY

The hatred toward women stems from the notion of 'hypergamy' in that women are sexually hyperselective, have narrow views of attractiveness and lower levels of promiscuity than men. Dr Brace explained that like far-right groups, incels dream back to a 'golden age' prior to the sexual revolution of the 1960s where women depended on men for economic and social security, meaning that the hypergamy was "kept in check". However, with the progression of society and the advance of feminism, women are less dependent on men and allowed more sexual freedom. As a result, incels believe that women only sleep with the most attractive men in society - the Chads. This is neatly packaged into the 80/20 rule, a theory that 80% of women will only sleep with 20% of men. Dr Brace pointed out that this strips women of all agency and that **"this incredibly misogynistic aspect often transitions to pure hatred"**.

PILLING

According to Dr Brace, pilling is one of the many ideas that incels have borrowed from the far-right. Inspired by the film *The Matrix*, you can either take the blue pill and live in ignorance of the social and sexual hierarchy, or you can take the red pill which wakes you up to the reality of the hierarchy and "makes you realise this is how the world works". However, incels have introduced a distinct third option: the black pill. Dr Brace argued that **"the concept of the black pill is where the incel ideology starts to become rather unique amongst extremist ideologies"**. The black pill dictates that the genetic traits that determine attractiveness and the social and sexual hierarchy are immutable, meaning that incels are destined to a life of loneliness. This often leads to discussions of suicide. Dr Brace argued that "this is when we start to see the real nihilistic tendencies that characterise the incel ideology".

ORIGINS AND FUTURE TRAJECTORY OF THE INCEL SUBCULTURE

Dr Brace stressed that it is important to remember that the incel movement does not exist in a vacuum; in fact, it is part of a loose conglomerate of anti-women and anti-feminist groups called the 'manosphere', which includes Pick Up Artists, MGTOW, and Men's Rights Activists. Dr Brace pointed out that these groups have become more extreme and misogynistic over time and that many incel forums now "display the same levels of toxicity that we see in well-known far-right platforms". Dr Brace also noted a migration of incel platforms away from dedicated incel forums like incels.me to more established platforms like Telegram and Discord. Dr Brace said that this may be a worrying development as it suggests that more young people are engaging with incel material.

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT THE INCEL SUBCULTURE

Dr Brace then addressed a series of questions he is often asked by the media, law enforcement and students.

1. Is the incel ideology extremist?

To this Dr Brace answered with a resounding yes. First, it exhibits all the hallmarks of an extremist ideology, mainly the existence of in-groups and out-groups and crisis solution narratives. All extremist ideologies have in-groups and out-groups. With incels, incels themselves are the in-group and the alphas, betas and women the out-groups - with women being depicted most negatively. When the out-group denies the in-group what they supposedly are entitled to, this can be met by "extreme anger, rage and sometimes violence".

Crisis solution narratives are another similarity between incels and far-right groups where they draw on the 'politics of nostalgia'. To incels this was prior to the 1960s when all men were entitled to sex, which kept the hypergamy in place, allowing even unattractive men to have sexual relationships. Incels view the current 'gynocentric' society as being in crisis, however, compared to far-right groups, they do not provide a clear solution to this perceived crisis.

Secondly, the incel ideology is fundamentally supremacist in that incels view themselves superior to all women, despite being at the bottom of the social and sexual pecking order.

2. Are incels related to the far right?

Dr Brace argued for seeing incels and the far-right as drawing from the same 'hinterland' in that they draw upon similar ideas. Both use the same sensibilities in the way of common memes, language and images. Dr Brace was sceptical of the claim that far-right individuals 'prey' on incels in order to recruit them into far-right groups arguing that this is not backed up by empirical data.

PART III

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

PART 1 - THE FAR-RIGHT

- Where are you getting your data from and how are you putting it together?

Dr Brace explained that he collects the data in-house by reviewing an array of far-right websites. Once he has isolated a website of interest he uses computer programs like Python and builds a web swathe of text and image data for analysis. In terms of bringing the data together, Dr Brace pointed out that it depends on what type of analysis is needed (text based or image based).

- Is there a way of shutting these extremist websites down completely or is that impossible in the current age of the internet?

To this, Dr Brace answered with a resounding no. There is no way of shutting down extreme or illegal websites completely without others emerging in its place. Dr Brace used the example of the website 'pirate bay' which every time it is shut down, other similar sites pop up in its place. Dr Brace states that "it is the same with the far-right stuff on the chans, just on steroids". However, he pointed out that it is worth noting that these websites often have a 'shelf life'. Dr Brace noted that throughout 2020, traffic decreased on the chans but increased on platforms like telegram, indicating a platform migration. Brace pointed out that we will never know for sure whether this was natural or due to concerns of law enforcement surveillance. However, it suggests a shelf life of extremist platforms with people moving away from the more obscure chans to more conventional social media platforms like Tiktok and Instagram.

- In response to the U.S failure of producing counter-narratives to ISIS propaganda, are security practitioners involving different people in the generation of counter-narratives that better appeal to the target audience?

Dr Brace states that this question "hit the nail straight on the head". After the backfire of the U.S counter-narrative operation, a study got ethical clearance from the US government to involve young people in the creation of counter-narratives against propaganda developed by ISIS. This proved to be more successful. However, involving young people in these operations always poses ethical dilemmas. Overall, Dr Brace argued that "this is problematic, and it is something we are going to have to deal with more effectively".

- Organised terrorist groups often try to persuade the government to do something or the public to support them. This is not the case for right wing, lone wolf terrorism. Why do you think that is?

Dr Brace guessed that this roots in the self-organisation of these groups, which makes them more inward looking. This may be a plausible explanation for the differences between more organised terrorist groups and these new self-organised far-right groups.

PART 2 - INCELS

- From what it seems, incels are not politically or ideologically cohesive enough for a counter-terrorist approach to be justified (as it has been in Canada). Is there another approach the UK government can take?

Dr Brace advocated for a public health approach to incels since we know from the individuals who have committed violent attacks that incels have social and mental health issues. The UK still has the public health option open as there has only been one major violent attack committed by an incel. Dr Brace contrasted this with Canada which has established incels as an extremist ideology since it has experienced a number of incel related attacks. In his words, Canada has "gone past the point of justifying a public health approach" and has to use the counter-terrorist approach to prevent future violence. He stressed the combination of push and pull factors, while highlighting that it is hard to reach any definitive conclusions since there is a lack of research on the psychological profile of incels.

- Both England and Scotland have moved toward incorporating incels into school curriculums to prevent radicalisation. Do you think that this is the right way forward?

Dr Brace argued that this is worth doing. Incel ideology draws from existing misogyny in society, albeit less extreme. Moreover, incels are most commonly between the ages of 13-19, so teaching students about incels in schools may be a good way to prevent radicalisation. It would also help us to build a psychological profile of incels.

- Incels are most prevalent in North America and Europe but have you seen the presence of incels in other parts of the world?

Dr Brace said that the geographical locations of incels is something he is exploring at the moment and thus did not have a definite answer. Most incel activity is concentrated in North America and Europe, however, Dr Brace added the caveat that due to language restrictions, he may not know the full extent of incel presence elsewhere.

- It seems that incels do not have outright hate toward its out groups like other far-right movements. How does that influence its classification as an extremist organisation?

Dr Brace warned against using the term organisation since incels are an online subculture. He established that they are extremist and that they have outright hate for women, which is the same level of hatred as seen in far-right groups. Overall, he argued that incel ideology is extremist and supremacist and that any supremacist ideology has the potential to be dangerous.



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