

# More Grist to the Mill? Reciprocal Radicalisation and Reactions to Terrorism in the Far-Right Digital Milieu

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## Abstract

*Reciprocal radicalisation is the theory that extremist organisations are connected and feed on one another's rhetoric and actions to justify violent escalation. Recent empirical work has suggested that reciprocal radicalisation is a good deal more subtle than is often assumed, and is nuanced by organisational, social and political context. This study seeks to apply the theory of reciprocal radicalisation to the far-right digital milieu, an online space conceptualised as underpinning the varying physical manifestations of the far-right. Based on a qualitative thematic analysis of user posts in three far-right web forums, the study concludes that responses to ideologically opposed terrorism within the far-right milieu are often at odds with the assumed radicalising effects of terrorist attacks. While responses were not uniform, for many users in the far-right digital milieu, jihadist terrorism was an obvious and expected result of the wider failures of politics and society. Although there were some calls for violent reprisal, they were juxtaposed by non-violent responses which interpreted jihadist terror as a consequence and sign of societal decadence and political weakness around issues of migration and rights.*

**Keywords:** far-right extremism, radicalisation, right-wing terrorism

## Introduction

Extremism is frequently presented as a two-sided coin; extreme beliefs and actions in one group fuel a corresponding extremism in another. Recent work on reciprocal radicalisation and cumulative extremism has pointed out that relationships between extremists are often complex, and there has been a call for more conceptual clarity when discussing reciprocal radicalisation. Recent research suggests that greater attention should be paid to the wider political and social context, and to the various channels connecting opposing groups.[1]

Existing conceptions of the far-right tend to focus on named groups and hierarchical organisations at a time when far-right activism has increasingly manifested online. Although far-right groups and movements represent a core security challenge, this analysis suggests that the role of larger organisations in the far-right has changed. [2] Much far-right activism now takes place online over a series of digital platforms conceptualised loosely as a digital milieu. Rather than understanding supporters of the far-right as affiliated to specific groups or ideologies, we conceptualise far-right activism as more autonomous and fluid, with activists free to graze on a variety of ideologies and narratives offered digitally. Physical mobilisations represent the outward manifestation of a much larger and more inclusive digital space. So, while the reactions of groups and movements to ideological opponents are still of significance, there is an open question about how such opponents are understood and targeted in less organised digital spaces. The central research question of this analysis is, how do users in the far-right digital milieu react to terror attacks by militant jihadists?

We provide a qualitative thematic analysis of responses on three platforms representing differing factions within the far-right digital milieu.

- The Right Stuff Forum, an alt-right affiliated forum linked to the website and podcast host therightstuff.biz
- Gates of Vienna, an influential blog within counter jihadism
- Stormfront, a well-established white supremacist forum

Data is drawn from a series of terror attacks in the United Kingdom in 2017. These attacks were perpetrated by individuals belonging to religious and ethnic minorities to which the far-right is assumed to be hostile. Attacks were also indiscriminate and included victims who conformed to in-groups that the far-right claims to

represent (although these were defined differently in each space).

- 22 March 2017, Westminster attack
- 22 May 2017, Manchester Arena bombing
- 3 June 2017, attack in the London Bridge area

Analysis shows responses in far-right digital spaces to jihadist attacks were mixed. Rather than the explicit calls for escalation and matched violence that might have been anticipated in a fully two-directional relationship between far-right and jihadist extremism, commentators quickly integrated terror attacks into wider preestablished narratives that focused heavily on criticism of both the government and societal actors deemed to be weak in the face of threats from minorities. This is better explained by the older theory of split delegitimization than it is by reciprocal radicalisation.[3] This supports wider analyses that have begun to question the assumed links between extremisms.

### ***Reciprocal Radicalisation: Theoretical and Empirical Evidence***

The starting point for this analysis is the assumption that different forms of extremism, in this case jihadism and far-right extremism, are connected to one another and mirror actions on the opposing side. Reciprocal radicalisation has been identified by many names[4], including cumulative extremism[5], cumulative radicalisation[6], tit-for-tat radicalisation[7], co-radicalization[8], and interactive escalation.[9] The term reciprocal radicalisation is used here as it has become the preferred term for policy makers and featured briefly in the UK Government's 2015 counter-extremism strategy[10] as well as in the press.[11]

The original observation that led to the concept of cumulative extremism stemmed from Roger Eatwell's analysis of the 2001 riots in Northern England through the lens of the 2005 terrorist attack on London.[12] Among a list of issues he believed were leading to increased ethnic tensions, Eatwell noted the impact of 'extremist animosities fuelling each other'.[13] Centring on Bradford, Eatwell suggested that the presence of far-right groups, including the British National Party (BNP) and the National Front, contributed to the formation of new forms of 'racial identity politics'. The theory was that the far-right's attempts at mobilisation in the area, centring on the Muslim other and in particular the statements of extremist preachers such as Abu Hamza, contributed to the violence.[14] On the other side, the BNP is identified as serving as a scapegoat for Muslim leaders, allowing them to avoid asking harder questions about the support for violence within their own community. These developments on both sides, Eatwell argued, contributed to a wider clash of civilisations narrative.

Likewise, the idea of escalations between competing extremist groups had been identified by other researchers in different contexts. Sprinzak's[15] analysis of the Israeli radical right for example included a description of the Jewish Underground's reactions to a series of Arab terror attacks, describing an 'outcry for revenge'.[16] The Jewish Underground went on to attack Arab mayors, a Muslim college in Hebron, and attempted to blow up five Arab buses.[17] In the realm of social movement theory, countermovements, including cases such as the pro-life movement in the US, are interpreted as arising in response to the perceived legislative successes of their opponents.[18] Countermovements are seen as issue-focused; they make competing claims on the state and seek coverage from the media.[19] A similar relational and dynamic approach explicitly grounded in social movement theory, from Alimi et al., has argued that radicalisation is about more than the risk factors associated with groups and emerges where the 'relational context' is supportive.[20] Work from 2017 has also demonstrated the need for nuance and context, where seemingly minor conflicts and frictions drive a broader radicalisation. Even minor brushes with the state, individuals or, in the context of reciprocal radicalisation, opposing groups, can contribute to the wider process of radicalisation.[21]

However, it was Eatwell's (2006) observation that caught the imagination of researchers. Goodwin[22] applied his thesis to the emergence of the English Defence League (EDL), a counter-jihad inspired street group that emerged following protest activities by the Islamist group Al-Muhajiroun.[23] Goodwin's account is explicit that the formation of the EDL in response constituted cumulative extremism. This is at odds somewhat with

Eatwell's original description of cumulative extremism in the context of violent clashes, seemingly expanding the concept to include the foundation of an organisation. This expansion of reciprocal radicalisation theory to encompass not only behaviour but organisational change was noted by Bartlett and Birdwell.[24] In support of this, they highlighted statements by the UK Prime Minister in response to the murder of Drummer Lee-Rigby, footage of the killers at an anti-EDL protest, as well as a separate foiled 2012 plot to attack an EDL rally.[25] Among the recommendations offered by Bartlett and Birdwell was to further develop the concept of reciprocal radicalisation by differentiating between increasing support for a group and escalation of tactics within already-established groups.

An intervention by Busher and Macklin called for specificity in the analysis of reciprocal radicalisation.[26] They walked back Eatwell's original idea, reframing it as focussing on 'interactional dynamics', but suggesting that more specificity was needed to explain why interactions between extremists very often did not result in any observable escalation. For Busher and Macklin, cumulative extremism relied too heavily on an isolated explanation, and their proposals served to root escalations in social, political and temporal contexts. Of particular interest in this study is the question of coupling between movements. Busher and Macklin noted that opposing movements can be coupled asymmetrically, and that they may not mirror one another directly but may instead remain within their own fixed repertoires of action. The push towards conceptualising reciprocal radicalisation as a more dynamic process influenced by the wider political and social context was further emphasised in a follow-up analysis by Busher and Macklin.[27]

The empirical evidence for reciprocal radicalisation has been mixed. The case for it has included a heavily reported connection between terror attacks and hate-crime against minorities.[28] Likewise, the manifestos of far-right terrorists have in some cases explicitly referenced violence by opposed groups.[29] Other studies have looked explicitly at the relationships between groups and movements, most notably the interlinkage between jihadists and the far-right. Holbrook analysed the English-language discourses of Islamists and the far-right, raising concerns that the militancy present in jihadist activism might work to shame far-right activists unable to match their ferocity.[30] Ebner's wide-ranging analysis of different forms of extremism argues that Neo-Nazism and Salafism are ideologically two sides of the same coin and notes references to one another's ideologues in rhetoric and the propensity of various outrages from both sides to act as recruiting sergeants in what Ebner calls a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'.[31]

By way of counterevidence, Macklin and Busher offered a historical analysis of mobilisations between fascists and anti-fascists over four distinct periods in the UK.[32] They noted the missing 'spirals of violence', suggesting that repertoires of action are relatively fixed, and that broader movement strategies, intra-movement dynamics, the state, and movement cultures, all factor into how movements respond to one another. In the case of the four waves identified by Macklin and Busher, violence occurred in short-lived spikes as opposed to perpetually escalating spirals. Carter took Northern Ireland as a historical example of movement-counter-movement relationship in a situation in which movements were closely connected to wider sectarian interests within Northern Irish society.[33] While the fascist-anti-fascist mobilisations more commonly used as evidence of cumulative extremism provided a useful case study, neither movement commanded significant support from the wider community, as was the case in Northern Ireland.[34]

Taking the evidence together, the resulting picture is somewhat unclear. In some cases, extremist groups and actors undoubtedly see themselves as taking revenge for the outrages of ideological opponents. However, these connections have been seen to vary depending on the wider organisational, political and social contexts. In the case of fascist and anti-fascist mobilisations for example, groups have been largely unwilling to move away from their already-established patterns of behaviour. What follows identifies a new organisational context for the far-right and sets up the analysis that follows as a test, or more accurately an exploration, of reciprocal radicalisation theory in the context of a far-right digital milieu.

### ***The Far-Right Digital Milieu***

The far-right digital milieu as conceptualised here is a digital space that acts as a repository of far-right ideas and narratives, as well as providing a site of connections between a range of far-right factions. Although factions

may be ideologically differentiated, they are envisaged as sharing a dislike of both alien out-groups and the society and politics that is perceived to harbour them. Differing factions also share a distrust of mainstream social and political values they see as unfriendly towards shared far-right ideals. This paper seeks to identify the reactions in the far-right milieu to ideologically-opposed violence, and to test these against the expectations of the reciprocal radicalisation framework.

There has been a tendency to understand the far-right as a series of discrete organisations. An established traditional account of the far-right in the UK, for example, categorised organisations by their attitudes to political power.[35] The far-right was composed of distinctive coterie with little interest in political power, leagues and pressure groups seeking to exert indirect influence, and formally constituted parties that sought to contest elections. However, beneath these formal structures has always operated a more nebulous 'milieu' composed of influential figures and their audiences, often interacting through journals and interpersonal connections.[36]

Extreme and radical right authors, such as Louis Beam, argued that organisations would always be vulnerable to attack from outside and infiltration from within.[37] Academia too has continued to develop accounts of far-right organisation that portray it as increasingly flexible, fluid and hard to pin down.[38] Virchow[39] used the example of German neo-Nazi groups to put forward the idea of groupuscular organisation: many niche groups coordinated through informal contacts and shared sources of information.[40] More recent analysis of street groups has also drawn attention to informal modes of organisation and lack of hierarchy.[41] Explicit violence has also pointed to the limited role for organisations in explaining terrorism originating from the extreme right. Reviews of extreme-right attacks have often noted the increasing prevalence of so-called lone actors.[42]

Although formal organisations and physical mobilisations persist in the extreme and radical right, they have been joined by a fast-growing and more accessible network of influencers and activists online. Conceptualised here as the far-right digital milieu, this space encompasses the internet,[43] the world wide web[44] and social media.[45] Where the far-right presence has been removed from social media, there has been significant evidence of it organising on privacy-centric applications such as Discord or establishing new platforms such as Gab and Voat.

The concept of the digital milieu is intended to sit alongside hierarchical organisations, not replace them as a venue for far-right activism. However, the concept of a digital milieu better reflects the diminished role of organisation and the increased fluidity within the far-right. It draws in part on the idea of the radical milieu from terrorism studies as a space adjacent to terrorist movements where participation is possible without formal group membership, for example for the distribution of propaganda.[46] The radical milieu, as conceptualised by Waldmann and others, is probably too narrowly drawn, however, to encompass the entirety of far-right activism as it deals explicitly with terrorism. In addition, it is based on an assumption that all actors are pulling in the same direction, which again is difficult to identify in the highly factionalised contemporary far-right.

A more fitting description comes from the work of Colin Campbell, specifically his conceptualisation of the cultic milieu. While the concept of a cultic milieu has been used as the basis for accounts of neo-Nazi occultism and the overlapping organisations of the US far-right, it also serves as a good basis for understanding the current far-right digital milieu.[47] Campbell observed a world of new religious movements and esoterica in which organisations were constantly emerging and collapsing and in which, for the most part, members showed a willingness to engage with one another and entertain their ideas. Where organisations did emerge, there was little expectation of loyalty from followers (except in revelatory cults). The common core, Campbell observed, was heterodoxy and opposition to mainstream thought, as well as a shared ideological commitment to seeking truth.[48] Similarly, the far-right digital milieu contains a range of ideological positions encompassing both the radical and the extreme. While some of these positions are incompatible, for example neo-Nazism and counter-jihadism, they have a shared dislike of the 'liberal' establishment as well as minority groups. Although anti-Semitism is a clear point of fracture, content critical of left-wing politics or Muslims for example may be well received in both factions. The resulting picture is one conceived here as the far-right digital milieu, composed of platforms, actors and mobilisations.

- The milieu is distributed across a range of **platforms**. This may include social media but can also include conventional websites and other platforms. Where discourse is too extreme for social media, actors will typically seek to move to other platforms.[49]
- Influencers are **actors** who seek to build a following within the milieu, frequently by creating content in the form of text, videos, or other items. In contrast, most rank and file actors within the milieu are passive, either reacting and sharing original content created by others, or consuming content without interacting.
- Where conditions are conducive, the far-right digital milieu may give rise to physical **mobilisations**. These can be collective e.g. street protests, political campaigning, and they can also be individual such as stickering campaigns and lone direct-action including violence.

Identifying the contemporary far-right as a digital milieu highlights five features of relevance to an analysis of reciprocal radicalisation. First, the digital milieu is potentially limitless in **size**. While physical mobilisations are limited by cost and geography, there are no such limits in the digital space. Any and all activists can potentially involve themselves in any and all areas of the milieu. Second, following directly from the scale of the milieu is the well-documented lack of respect for **geographic boundaries** in various manifestations of the far-right.[50] Ironically for ideologies built on nationalism, physical location within the milieu is often irrelevant. In the case of reciprocal radicalisation, which has its origins in local contests between groups, analysis needs to consider that activists may be contributing who are not even on the same continent.

Third, while physical participation is both costly in resources and risky for activists seeking to limit public exposure, activism within the digital milieu is relatively cheap and **low risk**. Activists can participate anonymously and largely free from the risk of reprisals for their actions or statements. Fourthly, the milieu is an **information space** (rather than a physical 'meat space') and so verifiable responses will likely be limited to rhetoric only, although the influence of the digital milieu on individuals and groups is an open question. Finally, the milieu is **inclusive**, allowing any would-be influencers to 'have a go' either through contributions on social media, forums, or discrete websites. While very few attain the dominant status of sites, such as The Right Stuff, Daily Stormer and Geller Report, these are simply the most visible superstructures of an enormous reservoir of potential influencers with their own platforms. In the context of interactive platforms such as web forums in particular, this means a single narrative strand is often difficult to extract from posts reacting to an event. While previous analysis has tended to focus on organisational responses, responses in a digital milieu are likely to be less coherent.

Overall, this creates an expectation that reciprocal radicalisation trends in the far-right digital milieu are likely to be harder to analyse than those identified in distinct groups and movements. Analysis is limited largely to communication rather than behavioural data and will need to accommodate a range of potential responses from a geographically and ideologically diverse population. However, taking this approach also prevents the problem of focusing solely on those relationships and reactions arising from discrete organisations, and thus missing a large component of contemporary far-right activism.

### ***Data and Methods***

To recap, reciprocal radicalisation embodies the idea that different forms of extremism will escalate their behaviours and rhetoric based on the actions of opposed groups. However, the empirical evidence thus far suggests that any analysis needs to take into account the broader context in which groups are operating. In this paper we look to a broader scale than organised groups or movements. Based on our conceptualisation of the far-right digital milieu, reactions to opposing extremist groups are expected to be less coherent, less inhibited by immediate risk, and to come from a wider range of geographical settings. What this paper now seeks to do is to analyse the reactions to oppositional extremist violence within the far-right milieu in the hope of understanding how well these reactions match up to the reciprocal radicalisation thesis.

Operationalising this requires focusing on the trends underpinning reciprocal radicalisation. The following framework was based in part on Benford and Snow's approach to frame analysis in social movement theory but adapted to fit the specific context of reciprocal radicalisation.[51] It was further developed on the basis of a pilot analysis of the data. The framework is in three parts, consisting of blame, victimisation and response.

- *Blame*: The primary consideration here is the way in which terrorism is characterised and who is held responsible for it. If the far-right digital milieu is in part motivated by responding to the actions of militant jihadists then we would expect a recognition within the milieu that militant jihadists are responsible for an attack and constitute a specific and recognisable opponent.
- *Victimisation*: A second analytical consideration is how activists within the milieu describe and interpret the victims of a terror attack. This factor has not yet been discussed explicitly in the reciprocal radicalisation literature. However, it is not unreasonable to assume that reciprocal radicalisation is in-part related to how victims are perceived. Sympathy with victims can be interpreted as an appropriate motivation and justification for a response. This question is thought to be particularly relevant to activists within the far-right, many of whom believe some sections of Western societies to be decadent, or culpable for terrorism in other ways, for example through support for immigration.
- *Response*: Lastly, the analysis seeks to capture discussion of potential responses to terror attacks. In the context of reciprocal radicalisation the main issue of interest here is discussions of violent responses and escalation. However, other forms of response and non-response will also be considered.

To be clear a qualitative and exploratory approach has been taken to the available data, with these themes being identified in the pilot phase and applied thereafter. The intention here has been to develop a better understanding of how the mechanics of reciprocal radicalisation play out in the far-right digital milieu. The aim of the paper has not been to produce a census of extreme-right views online, nor to identify a single dominant trend within a specific forum. Given our conceptualisation of the far-right digital milieu above, complex and conflicting views are to be expected.

This research focused specifically on comment data provided on three far-right, English language websites and forums in the aftermath of terrorist attacks. The sites were chosen on the basis of their prominence within contrasting factions of the milieu. We selected sites that were widely perceived as influential or important by activists themselves. This is not intended to be a comprehensive or systematic survey of far-right web presences.

**Table 1: Case selection**

Site	URL	Faction
Gates of Vienna	<a href="http://gatesofvienna.net/">http://gatesofvienna.net/</a>	Counter Jihad
The Right Stuff Forum	<a href="https://forum.therightstuff.biz/category/82/news-current-events">https://forum.therightstuff.biz/category/82/news-current-events</a>	Alt-Right
Stormfront	<a href="https://www.stormfront.org/forum/index.php">https://www.stormfront.org/forum/index.php</a>	White Supremacy

**Table 2: Jihadist terror attacks in the UK 2017**

Date	Location
22 March 2017	Westminster
22 May 2017	Manchester Arena
3 June 2017	London Bridge

**Overview of the Data**

The comment data were rich and dense, but also messy. Responses to different attacks varied widely in scale. Gates of Vienna (GoV) is published as a blog and users can interact in the form of a comment. GoV tended to make multiple posts following an attack as a result of which the conversation in the comment section was diffused over different posts. In this case, the analysis was based on the first four posts dealing with an attack. Responses in both Stormfront (SF) and The Right Stuff Forum (TRSF), both organised as web forums, tended to coalesce around single large threads. In each case the largest thread was included in the analysis.

**Table 3: Responses to posts on UK terror attacks**

	Westminster (22/3/17)	Manchester (22/5/17)	London Bridge (3/6/17)
Gates of Vienna (first four posts only)	158	188	83
Stormfront	400	925	578
The Right Stuff	NA	340	13

As Table 3 shows, SF was the most prolific of the sites, publishing 1,903 comments across the three events. GoV featured far fewer user comments, perhaps reflecting its organisation as a blog. TRSF was the most erratic of the forums. At the time of data collection, the comments relating to the Westminster attack were unavailable. The Manchester bombing generated an extensive discussion thread, while the London Bridge attack discussion was cursory. It is unclear if this was discussed in more depth on another part of the forum. The Manchester bombing, which took place immediately following a concert by Ariana Grande, generated the greatest reaction across all three sites. Looking at the discussion the merger of Jihadist violence with popular culture seemed to create a particularly powerful reaction.

Before turning to the analysis, it is important to stress the theoretical aspect of this case selection. The three sites are interpreted as distinct but not unified factions within the far-right digital milieu. They do not represent coherent movements or organisations, and the analysis does not seek to identify a definitive position on the blame for the attacks or what should be done as a consequence. Rather, this analysis aims to highlight the reasoning on display within these spaces and to suggest general trends.

In this vein, there are some headline trends on display in the data. First, users returned to threads multiple times. This was particularly so where significant new information came to light. On SF, several users emerged as key figures responding multiple times across the different attacks. This confirms previous observation of SF that argued for considering the site as a digital community.[52] However, it is also the case that individual users may post under multiple names. This means that the size of the datasets cannot be equated to the number of individual users posting; it is possible that relatively few users may be creating a large amount of material.[53]

Secondly, there were a large number of links to material on other sites. This included links to extremist media, for example commentary produced by influential figures within the far-right milieu. Where threads were

being updated in real time there was a much greater reliance on regular media. Despite the critical approach to the 'mainstream media' in the milieu, content in the milieu continues to be reliant on information made available through mainstream reporting that cannot be accomplished by smaller radical media producers. This coincides with previous observations of the role of extremist online networks in curating regular media content for supporters.[54]

Third, distinctive voices were on display in each of the spaces analysed. These coincided with the broader character of each faction. GoV, as a counter-jihadist blog, reflected a focus on civic values and a broader appeal for respectability and legitimacy.[55] TRSF reflected the more playful and outrageous tendencies of the alt-right, alongside posts more clearly intended to shock and demonstrate the user's edginess.[54] SF, as the oldest and seemingly largest space analysed, reflected a more traditional right-wing extremism. There was comparably greater emphasis on biological race in both TRSF and SF compared to GoV's more cultural take. Likewise, attempts to link violent Islamist terrorism to a Jewish conspiracy were absent from GoV, but present on both TRSF and SF.[56]

Lastly, discussions paid very little attention to geography. Although usernames often suggested a specific location (e.g. HailBritain) there was no way to confirm the locations of users posting. This is significant in the context of the far-right digital milieu, further supporting the idea that, despite the emphasis on nationalism inherent in far-right activism, the online space has fostered a more inclusive form of right-wing extremism that places greater emphasis on shared ethnicity (SF, TRSF) or culture (GoV) than nation states.

The following analysis reports findings based on the three aspects of reciprocal radicalisation developed above: the assignment of blame for terror attacks, the position of the victims of terror attacks, and attitudes towards future action.

## ***Blame***

Terrorism is calculated to produce an emotive response from target audiences.[57] Within the framework of reciprocal radicalisation, terrorist action can be viewed as one potentially escalatory pathway between extremist groups and individuals. For this to be the case, terrorist violence needs to be clearly linked to a target outgroup. For this relationship to hold true, then responses to jihadist terrorism on the far right need to be clearly linked to the perpetrating groups or those they claim to represent. In the case of IS-inspired terrorism, this was expected to manifest in attributing blame to both jihadist groups and generalised references to the Muslim population. In practice, the data showed blame attributed to a wide array of actors. These included Muslims as a group but also extended to wider society (including victims of attacks) and political leadership. Within these categories, as illustrated below, there were further degrees of nuance. There was relatively little discussion of named opposition groups.

## ***The Muslim Other***

Given the framing of much far-right activity as anti-Muslim, it is no surprise that the blame for terror attacks was attributed to Muslims as a group or Islam as a religion. This was demonstrated in several instances, often beginning with speculation before an attacker's identity was formally known:

‘... I don't mean ‘islamists’ or ‘radical moslems’, let's be honest here, the problem is islam–plain, ordinary islam.’

:Peter35 GoV 23/5/2017

‘Ah, just the muslims, expressing their love for us with their weekly terrorist attack. When they are not raping our children, they are killing them.’

TenDollarBill SF 3/6/2017

The more alt-right orientated TRSF chose to make a joke out of the perceived routine nature of Islamist terror attacks. TRSF was notable for allowing users to embed images in their responses. User Wilhelm posted a commonly used image meme in the aftermath of the Manchester attack. The image was a still from the television show South Park with the caption ‘Let’s not jump to conclusions... Aaaand it’s Muslims.’ Another post on TRSF linked to a 44-second YouTube video composed entirely of British conspiracy theorist Paul Joseph Watson, repeating the phrase ‘imagine my shock.’[58]

### ***Political Elites***

While the assumed identity of the attackers was enough to link terrorism to the presence of Muslims for most users, some also sought to suggest that jihadist violence was evidence of some deeper problem. These explanations existed along a spectrum, encompassing the simple incompetence of the political elites tasked with security at one end, and outright conspiracy at the other.

‘Oh dear....What will the Muslim brotherhood mayor of Londistan have to say?’

Last Call, GoV, 22/3/17

‘Unhinged violence like this results when traitorous politicians allow a flood of Third World scum to displace the native Whites.’

PrairieSister, SF, 22/3/18

‘Jew supremacists are behind these attacks and blame the Muslims. Ariana Grande is a Jew puppet. Look up “Ariana Grande Satanist”. The Satanic Jews that control Hollywood own her. She always dates negros to help push White genocide.’

AmericaFree, SF, 22/5/2017

‘Theresa May is a traitor. She’s not stupid, she’s not mistaken, she’s not unwilling to admit she was wrong — she’s a traitor. May is a traitor and a member of the traitor class. Not the ruling class, the traitor class. The awash in Saudi money traitor class. Which has a death grip on the levers of power in Great Britain and a near death grip on the levers of power here in the States.’

Ricpic, GoV, 5/6/17

### ***Society***

Blame for jihadist terrorism was also directed at society more generally. This manifested as claims that society was in some way either stupid or degenerate and thereby responsible for the terrorism visited upon it.

‘Britons are still at the flowers and tea candles stage of awareness.’

Col. B. Bunny, GoV, 7/6/17

‘Just go back to your football and kebabs. I just saw two white morons interviewed by some CNN gimp, and all these morons could do was try to be funny and giggle like brain-dead retards. They don’t even care.’

Multiculturalism Sux, SF, 3/6/17

In some cases, the failure of societies to recognise and deal with terrorism was interpreted as an inherent longing for societal collapse.

‘I sometimes go on the prepper forums and realise they are all wanting it to happen. Especially in Britain, this life of an overbearing Nanny who wants you to watch your football and reality TV, drink

your beer and shut up. People are longing for a collapse.’

Edgyshitlord, TRSF, 26/5/2017

### **Victimisation**

A further consideration suggested by reciprocal radicalisation theory is the attitude to victims. The actions of an opposed group are implicitly assumed to harm individuals an extremist group perceives as part of its constituency. However, responses addressing the victims online varied dramatically.

In a small number of posts, commentators expressed sympathy with the victims, in some cases specifically noting that the victims could potentially have been someone close to them.

‘My heart and prayers go out to my fellow brothers and sisters in Manchester, UK. This was a concert full of young girls. These are our daughters!!!’

SPYDERcat, SF, 22/5/17

‘Meanwhile my heart goes out to all the victims, their family and friends. God bless them all.’

Disenfranchised, GoV, 23/3/17

‘I feel extremely bad for the cop who was knifed to death.’

Simon Legree, SF, 22/3/17

However, also present were narratives which suggested that the victims of terrorism were in some way responsible. Hubris (excessive pride or self-confidence) was a dominant theme in several posts. Where victims could be linked to wider narratives of societal failure this tendency was more acute. This placed much greater distance between commentators and victims, suggesting that the deaths and injuries of latter did not impact the former.

In the case of the Westminster attack, several commentators seized on the fact that the location of the attack was presumably targeting politicians as evidence of multicultural policies coming back to haunt their instigators. No variation in political positions was acknowledged, all political figures were grouped into the same class.

‘How terrible. I hope all them politicians are OK :p’

Lizardman, SF, 22/3/17

‘I don’t have any sympathy for liberal politicians. They are getting what they deserve (cultural enrichment).’

Ssvanguard, SF, 22/3/17

The politics and ethnicity of Ariana Grande became a particular focus with some commentators. This was also extended to the victims present at the Manchester concert. This is a similar mechanism to that used to distance the space from the politicians and elites of Westminster.

‘So, an arena, chocked full of globalists/marxists, was bombed by the same Islamic fundamentalists they sponsor... the irony! I am having a hard time finding sympathy for the dead and injured concert goers, the promoters, and the performers. All of them promote white genocide! ’

Beowulf, SF, 22/5/17

In addition to directly blaming victims for the attacks, some went further, welcoming jihadist violence as good for their wider political agenda.

‘This shit needs to happen every day. Every country in Europe needs this happening every day. Fastest way to wake them normies up.’[59]

Wilhelm, TRSF, 23/5/17

In this instance these arguments were directly contested by other commentators arguing that accusing the concertgoers of promoting white genocide could not be supported. The tendency to blame instead of sympathize with the victims generated overt friction within these online spaces. Where users made these arguments there were often others expressing criticism. This was either on the grounds that the conclusions being reached about the attitudes of the victims were unsupported, or that blaming the victims in this way would make the wider far-right seem uncaring.

‘I don’t think you saying ‘Good’ will attract Britons to WN[white nationalism], even if they get woken up by this event.’

Last Patrol, SF, 22/3/17

‘Your comment is either from a sick soul or one that has been defeated and is desperately lashing back. Those were our people, children nonetheless targeted, and someone could feel even a hint of glee or complete indifference?’

Kaspar Hauser, SF, 22/5/17

## **Response**

In keeping with the distributed organisation of the milieu, suggested responses were diverse. Equally, the overall contents of the thread were far more orientated towards assigning blame for the attacks than proposing any course of action to prevent further attacks. Although caution is advised in identifying systematic trends in this way, there was a distinction between how the different user groups proposed reacting to the attack. These included indirect calls for violence against both ethnic minorities and political elites.

## **Violent Responses**

At the most extreme, some commentators openly advocated violence in response to the attacks. This was consistent to some degree with the concept of reciprocal radicalisation, with violence by one group or side driving a violent response from the other. One user referenced a future holocaust. This was probably the most overtly violent response identified in the material as it advocated for genocide of non-Whites and those of mixed race. Potentially this post only managed to survive moderation on the site as it was buried partway through a post that included an embedded music video and accompanying song lyrics.

‘The coming non white and mixed white Holocaust will be glorious and it is coming despite all the defeatist moaning on these sites.’

DeadBonesRising, SF, 22/3/17

DeadBonesRising also uses the post to critique what they see as ‘defeatist moaning’ by other users, suggesting that other responses expressing frustration at the apparent inability of societies to protect themselves were weak.

Another post made on GoV in the aftermath of the London Bridge attack made a specific reference to the assassination of politicians and journalists out of frustration at their treachery. This represents a different advocacy of violence from calls to target ethnic and religious minorities. The framing of the threat in the form of a question distances the author from an explicit call to violence while leaving open the possibility that

they would endorse such actions.

‘When will citizen groups begin assassinating their traitor politicians? After 1 more attack, 2 more? At some point British politicians will be knifed & shot & mowed down by citizens fed up with the traitor class. Journalists may also be targeted for their deliberate lies.’

Stephen Carter, GoV, 5/6/17

Other references appeared to be slightly more veiled, including one user referring to ‘Crusades 2.0’ in an apparent threat against Muslims, and others suggesting that violent attacks were building towards wider violence, though it was left unclear as to whom such violence would be directed.

‘We are getting close to The Crusades 2.0. Keep pushing muzzies.’

beast9, SF, 23/3/17

‘I do honestly think that there IS a way out in the longer term but I would add that there is no pathway that I can foresee at this point that is peaceful, pleasant or benign.’

Watching and waiting, GoV, 5/6/17

‘Fire will meet fire! No amount of Liberals that love them and protect them will stop it.’

BulldogRevolver, SF, 22/3/17

Less clear is the following post on Gates of Vienna:

‘We need to create list, database of these writers of these[epithet] newspapers who are still putting out this marxist garbage and covering for islam. And the editors who allow it to go to print.’

Zhukov, GoV, 23/3/17

This user advocated for creating a list of enemies, although the purpose is unclear. The creation of such lists has been a common tactic in the far-right space.[60]

Where violence was referenced or even explicitly advocated, it was done in an indirect way. There is little in the analysis of the threads that can be construed as evidence of specific actions to be undertaken. Instead, posting remained vague. It is not clear whether there was an understanding among users that such planning should be kept off public forums, which is likely, or if such planning is simply not extant in the digital spaces examined.

### ***Nonviolent Responses***

As well as indirectly advocating violence, nonviolent courses of action were discussed. Many of these involved the kind of nonviolent organising typically associated with campaign groups. One thread on Stormfront raised the possibility of using the coverage of the Westminster attack as a way of generating publicity.

‘Whatever, do what you like, I’m just pointing out that it is an opportunity to get some live coverage without getting censored. If you go now, everyone will see you, if you wait, no one will.’

time will tell, SF, 22/3/17

Another post talked in more general terms about organising for the future.

‘This youngest generation - generation Z? - the one coming up right now, these are the ones who understand all of this for what it is. If I had a nickel for every one I’ve spoken to about the invasion, and who understood perfectly, I’d be a wealthy woman.’

Roo, SF, 22/3/17

However, despite the widespread condemnation of political elites, there was a distinct undercurrent in many proposed responses that assumed a role for law enforcement, the justice system and the state, although the advocated responses were extremely draconian and could be considered a form of structural violence.

‘Start deporting them back to their muslim paradise until you are back to being the Great Britain I once knew, about how many years ago — at least 20 or 30 or more years ago.’

Maria\_dee, GoV, 23/3/2017

‘Most Moslems are coloured, deportation, based on inclined to be terrorist religion should take place, instead of picking on Poles or division with Scott’s.’

Pagonis, SF, 22/3/17

‘Westerners must now hold politicians, muslim groups, new media, and pro-immigration groups directly responsible for these murders. And criminal lawsuits are a good way to start.’

marsouin, GoV, 22/3/17

This is an acute contrast with the more overtly violent rhetoric, suggesting that hope remains for an orderly response to the problems identified by the far-right. This may illustrate a distinction between those who wish to violently overthrow the current order and impose a new political solution (extremists), and those who retain a belief in a longer term and potentially more peaceful political transition, albeit one with far-reaching and potentially violent outcomes that include mass deportations and restrictions to individual rights (radicals).

## **Conclusions**

This research note has taken the concept of reciprocal radicalisation and attempted to apply it to unorganised digital spaces rather than organised and coordinated movements. As a consequence of focusing on the digital milieu, there are some limitations to the conclusions we can draw. While the general push of reciprocal radicalisation research has been the need for greater contextualization and precision, the far-right digital milieu effectively decontextualizes far-right activism, limiting it to the information space. While the incidents of interest all took place in the UK, the far-right response captured here is global, albeit exclusively English-speaking. Likewise, activity in the far-right milieu also has temporal implications. While coherent groups and movements can be expected to develop reasonably consistent narratives over time, the data analysed here is a product of a particular configuration of users on the three sites who have potentially never interacted before and may never interact again. Had the configuration of users been different then the response may also have differed.

For the same reasons the data can be read in different ways. While there is evidence here to support the idea of some contributors using violent rhetoric against Muslims as a result of the attacks, there are contradictory stories also present in the data. Based on the attribution of blame, the positioning of victims, and the proposed solutions, there is less here to suggest that the users are likely to deepen their commitment or escalate their activities against their ideological opponents. Instead, the data indicate that the result of many thousands of words and posts is to incorporate incoming information about jihadist violence into preexisting narratives. There were subtle differences in narratives depending on the site. TRSF was noticeably more irreverent, SF more race-focused, and GoV attempted to emphasise a clash of cultures with less focus on race. Despite this, the three sites shared, along with the far-right digital milieu as a whole, a profound disconnection with the current social and political settlements in Europe and North America. Immigration, and Muslim immigration particularly, constitutes a grievance, as does the broader decline in the morality and vitality of the Western/White world.

The blame for attacks was variously attributed to a generalised Muslim other, political elites, and/or a wider sickness in society. Commentators generally did not view terrorist attacks as strategic and linked to the aims of jihadist groups or movements. This gave rise to the situation where the attackers and their goals were almost

completely ignored, subsumed under race and religion. In the minds of many, their actions were autonomous and inevitable rather than in service of a strategic goal. For activists within the far-right digital milieu it was both natural and inevitable that Muslims should hate them. It is in the field of blame that the instrumental reconfiguring of terror attacks to fit pre-existing worldviews is most evident. The actions of small groups of jihadi terrorists are quickly linked both to a political elite that is seen as either incompetent or actively pursuing policies designed to persecute the groups on behalf of which the far-right claims to speak. In some cases, this link is extended to encompass the entirety of the society from which the far-right feels disconnected.

The position of victims was also highly contested. Although some sympathy was on display, in many cases commentators took steps to distance themselves from victims, either by sidelining them or creating narratives in which their victimisation was somehow seen as hubristic. In either case, refusing to accept the victim of terrorism as one of their own further distances the far-right space from the retaliatory logic of reciprocal radicalisation. If the victims are not one of us, then no response is required.

Although some posts offered solutions, a great many posts were seeking to attribute blame. They revealed contrasting approaches, most notably between those advocating for violence and those advocating for legal change (but outside existing norms around human rights). Where violence was advocated it was against either generalised ethnic or religious groups, or against treacherous political leaders. Specific retaliation against groups was not explicitly advocated, although some of the posts could certainly be read as a ratcheting up of general tensions.

The methodological limitations of this study mean that we must remain cautious. This is a relatively deep dive into a small range of threads and should not be viewed as a comprehensive description of how specific online forums reacted to the attacks. Despite limitations arising from our approach, what we can say is that the far-right digital milieu does not behave as predicted by the reciprocal radicalisation thesis. Blame, victimisation and responses were all at odds with the revenge mechanics of reciprocal radicalisation. For these users at least, Jihadist terror attacks represented more grist to an existing mill rather than a stimulus for new courses of action. Seemingly few in these spaces required any further evidence for the hostility of 'Islam' or the need to extrapolate the actions of a small group to that of a wider population. Even more surprising was how little blame was attributed directly to the terrorists themselves. Blame instead quickly shifted to a series of targets that were consistent with deeper concerns held by those within the far-right milieu over the current political and social settlement in many Western countries. That Muslims engage in terrorism is taken as self-evident; the real crimes, in the eyes of the far-right digital milieu, are that political leaders and wider society either do not see the obvious truth of this or are somehow implicated in deliberately perpetuating terrorism. While activity within the milieu is by definition rhetorical only, it follows that any radical actions that might arise from this are just as likely, if not more so, to target political leadership as religious and ethnic minorities.

While the theoretical basis of this paper is the concept of reciprocal radicalisation, the results point to an older theoretical account of far-right terrorism. The theory of split delegitimization argues that right-wing terrorism is distinct as it targets primarily 'non-ruling groups' theorised as alien and hostile. Right-wing groups were theorised to expect silence or complicity from regimes.[61] However, this approach also highlighted how some groups had come to see the regime as co-opted by non-ruling groups and thereby making the regime, and those complicit with it, legitimate targets.[62] Based on the data analysed here, users of all three sites had closed the 'legitimation gap' to varying degrees. While the reciprocal radicalisation thesis presents the far-right and jihadi extremists as coupled enemies, in these far-right digital contexts analysis suggests that jihadist extremism is often taken as symptomatic of the greater threat presented by weak or complicit regimes.

This research has attempted to expand the concept of reciprocal radicalisation to take into consideration the wider digital milieu that forms the background context to more formal organisations. While other analyses have concentrated on organisations and movements, this research acknowledges the extent to which, for the far-right, organisation has become more digitally focused and autonomous, and traditional organisations have been hollowed out. Despite expanding the concept of reciprocal radicalisation, the findings support existing evidence from researchers that questions the explanatory validity of reciprocal radicalisation. In keeping with

Macklin and Busher's[63] historical analysis of fascist and anti-fascist mobilisations, the evidence here suggests that, in the context of the digital milieu, violent action can be taken as a sign of business as usual as opposed to a need to change existing repertoires of action.

On future research, a number of possibilities present themselves. Macklin and Busher's conclusions and suggestions remain untested in a range of settings and contexts. Most recently the debate around the risks posed by 'incel' culture raised the prospect of an extremist mindset seemingly disconnected entirely from traditional enemies and focused instead on both women and society more generally.[64] Understanding the relationships between this space and other extremist groups, as well as the wider social context, is an urgent research project. Likewise, this research has touched only a small section of the extreme-right space online. Looking ahead, accelerationist groups and channels, including the Siege Culture scene, may provide an interesting test case for reciprocal radicalisation, in particular given the tendency of such actors to co-opt to some degree the signs and symbols of Jihadism.[65] Lastly, more work remains to be done on the idea of the far-right milieu itself. Despite the widely acknowledged trends of increasing digital activism and the 'post-organisational' far-right, much research and policy remains firmly fixed on organisational models that are decreasing in relevance.[66] While the 'groupusculization' of the extreme-right movement has been widely acknowledged, the connective tissue that holds these grouplets together is inescapably digital.[67] As Campbell called for a greater focus on the milieu that supported the rapid cycle of cult formation and collapse, so too is there a need for a focus on the digital milieu underpinning emerging extreme-right groupuscules.[68]

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#### **Notes:**

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[4] Kim Knott, Benjamin Lee, and Simon Copeland, *Briefings: Reciprocal Radicalisation*. (Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, 2018).

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- [15] Ehud Sprinzak, 'The Emergence of the Israeli Radical Right,' *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1989), 171-192.
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- [22] Matthew Goodwin. *The Roots of Extremism: The English Defence League and the Counter-Jihad Challenge*. (2013)
- [23] The counter jihad is a far-right faction characterised primarily by a belief that Europe and the US are at risk of Islamisation. They are distinct from white supremacy and other forms of ethnonationalism in that they reject racial nationalism in favour of cultural markers of belonging, often subsumed under the heading of Judeo-Christian values. See: Benjamin Lee 'Why We fight: Understanding the Counter-Jihad Movement,' *Religion Compass*, vol. 10 no. 10, (2016), 257-265.
- [24] Jamie Bartlett and Jonathan Birdwell, 2013, op. cit.
- [25] Drummer Lee-Rigby was attacked and murdered in a Woolwich street by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale on 22 May 2013. Adebolajo and Adebowale attempted to behead Rigby and told passers-by that the attack was revenge for UK armed forces' attacks against Muslims. In June 2012 Omar Mohammed Khan, Mohammed Hasseen, Anzal Hussain, Mohammed Saud, Zohaib Ahmed and Jewel Uddin travelled to an EDL rally in Dewsbury. The rally ended early and the attackers returned to Birmingham. They were stopped on the M1 for having no car insurance. A subsequent search of the car uncovered homemade explosives, shotguns, knives and a statement describing a 'day of retaliation.'
- [26] Joel Busher and Graham Macklin, 2015, op. cit.
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- [30] Donald Holbrook, 'Far Right and Islamist Extremist Discourses: Shifting Patterns of Enmity,' in M. Taylor, Currie, P., and Holbrook, D. (eds.) *Extreme Right-Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*. (Bloomsbury, 2013)
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- [40] See also: Roger Griffin, 2003, op. cit.
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[59] Normie is a term used to refer to political unengaged whites by the alt-right

[60] The website 'redwatch' seemingly carried on from a printed newsletter linked to far-right terror group Combat18 of the same name. Other far-right spaces have given birth to 'campus watch', an initiative of the Middle East Forum, a thinktank linked to Daniel Pipes, which maintains lists of trustworthy and untrustworthy academics. A recent push by the German right-wing AfD encouraged schoolchildren to inform on teacher bias. Although these calls are not inherently violent, they feed into a well-established right-wing trope of the 'day of the rope', a point when scores will be settled against political opponents. This event-- mass murder of political opponents—is described in detail in the far-right novel *The Turner Diaries*, but has also featured more obliquely in a 2010 speech by UK far-right activist Paul Weston that included the line: 'You will appear before a Nuremberg-style court, and you will be tried for treason, and you will be tried for crimes against humanity, and for the first time in a very long time you will be answerable to us!'

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