Social media recruitment and online propaganda by extremist groups

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SOCIAL MEDIA RECRUITMENT AND ONLINE PROPAGANDA BY EXTREMIST GROUPS

A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

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University of Northern Iowa
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This Study by: Megan Robinson

Entitled: Social Media Recruitment and Online Propaganda by Extremist Groups

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University Honors

Date Dr. Evan Renfro, Honors Thesis Advisor

Date Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program
Abstract - As billions of people turn to their technologically elite phones and laptops for immediate information, online groups have learned how to take advantage of social media patterns and isolate people into a specific belief or carefully tailored platforms that eliminate opposing ideas. Extremist groups’ online presence have been studied as individual dilemmas, rather than being studied for patterns to combat the rapidly increasing radicalization of people who had no claim to these beliefs before social media. This study will contrast the online presence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the January 6th insurrectionists in terms of platforms usage, targeted populations, and effectiveness. Analysis of two distinctly opposing groups for their evolution of recruitment tactics and propaganda strategies can become the foundation for creating an online system that rejects groups who promote and breed violence in real life.

Key Words: Extremism, Propaganda, ISIS, January 6th Insurrection, Right - Wing Politics, Terrorism
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Introduction

January 6th, 2021, over seven hundred American citizens stormed into the Congressional Office Building in attempts to stop the certification of the electoral college vote from the 2020 presidential election (U.S. Attorney’s Office, 2022). Of those who stormed the building, around four hundred were arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for disorderly and disruptive conduct along with entering and remaining in a restricted building or grounds (U.S. Attorney’s Office, 2022). While the rioting occurred, far-right political groups were named to have planned, led, and executed the storm under the social media movement #StopTheSteal, which emerged earlier in November 2020. Surrounding the United States Presidential election on November 3rd, 2020, after the votes were called too close to confirm on election day, suspicion of election integrity with fake mail-in ballots and theories of vote tapering swept across the country as people logged onto their social media platforms to speak about the election (Holt and Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Lab (DFRLab), 2021). Several extremist groups took hold of the immense feelings of skepticism, and uncertainty that developed in Americans during the election certification; many of those who fell victim to the groups’ rhetoric did not have strong political ideologies to those groups before November 3rd, 2020 (Holt and Atlantic Council’s DFRLab, 2021). Before the three months of social media posts, skewed news article and constant television coverage between November 3rd and January 6th, the #StopTheSteal movement’s members did not have strong ties to any political group nor extreme ideological views against the United States government. This fact insinuates that a three-month period and access to social media accounts were the two factors needed to get seven hundred people to risk their well-being in connection with extremist groups.
How did online extremists radicalize a majority of the persons present into committing serious felonies and acts of violence against the United States government? The short answer, social media. A few manipulated social media algorithms, committed recruiters, and content markets, and billions of people on the internet ended with the speedy radicalization of persons.

Many news sources and political articles focus on what went down on January 6th, 2020: the initial break past barriers, the people hurt or killed, and the nation's response to the attack on the Capitol building. Instead of the timeline of January 6th, I will look back further into November 2020.

On top of the specifics of the #StopTheSteal extremism, I display another well-documented extremist group that used online social media tactics to radicalize otherwise non-connected individuals by creating targeted online propaganda. In the early 2010’s, a religious terror group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria utilized numerous social media algorithms to promote their religious views and radicalize foreigners into performing acts of violence under their wing. Starting in the early 2010’s, the terrorist organization flooded social media platforms with photos, videos, and quotes all boosting up the organization and trapping individuals into the group’s ideology (Williams, 2016). The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria managed to recruit numerous Americans into their ranks and move to Middle Eastern countries they occupied to strengthen their ranks (Williams, 2016). The group created specific rank positions for technical savvy members to create content across the Internet that drummed up support and brought in thousands of recruits.

This thesis looks at how social media recruitment that ends with in-person violence for extremist groups has evolved into the current day. Extremism is a tale as old as time, but the Internet is fairly new and how extremism grows has changed with its creation. I will be
evaluating ISIS’s online presence during their peak online presence in the year 2014 and #stopthesteal movement between 2020-2021 in hopes to find similarities, patterns, trends, evolutions or anything to help understand how extremists have evolved and how to curb violence despite these expansions.

As the internet continues to expand (phones, laptops, computers, homes, cars, wallets), studying how groups have used it in recruiting members has become increasingly important and more difficult. The paper will plainly display that online extremism is a bigger problem than previously thought and shine a light into what the future may look like if social media companies do not pay attention to their site usage or if people do not learn how they can become trapped into a spiral into radicalization and violence.
Definitions

This thesis is an analysis of two distinctive online presences in the process of radicalization. The writer is in the Political Science area and the thesis heavily leans on political science ideas and literature. As such the paper will reflect political science studies by defining the important words and word distinctions early to lay groundwork to defy the ‘common’ language that has separate connotations than the language necessary to understand the paper to its fullest.

Terrorism

The major distinctions that need to be addressed and laid out to create a clear-cut difference are the words extremism and terrorism. The United Nations Security Council (2004, pg. 2) Resolution 1566 gives a well-respected definition of terrorism that legal studies, political science studies, security studies and others all use as a definition:

- criminal acts, including against civilians, committed with the intent to cause death or serious bodily injury, or taking of hostages, with the purpose to provoke a state of terror in the general public or in a group of persons or particular persons, intimidate a population or compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act.

The UN’s definitions have three major pieces that categorizes terrorism as different from other acts of violence. The pieces of acts against civilians, intent to cause death or bodily harm, and provoking a state of terror, do not appear in every violent act and help to create a definite wordage.

Extremism

Extremism, on the other hand, is much broader and more complex. Extremism is the belief system of involving end-of-the spectrum ideas, normally politically or religiously. This ‘common’ definition is vague and filled with gray areas. What is extreme is hard to define in
broad senses. For this thesis, extremism will be the holding of views, political or religious, that do not reflect a majority of person’s or require extreme actions to complete an end goal. Many people can believe that overpopulation has resulted in problems for the international community but using genocide to curb overpopulation is not a view held by a majority of persons; this would be considered an extremist view with this definition.

_Terrorism and Extremism_

Terrorism can be extremism and extremism can be terrorism; however, the two terms do not depend on the other. They are related but not interchangeable. Many unknown persons were inducted into extremism over social media but only some commit terrorist acts. Extremism can be a stepping stone to terrorism. Another piece that muddles the definitions of terrorism and extremism is violent extremism. Erroll Southers’ book (2017) covering homegrown violent extremism states that “violent extremism occurs when individuals or groups openly express their ideological beliefs through violence or a call for violence (pg. 4)”. Violent extremism can be without targeting innocent civilians or the creation of terror in others, specifically politically, which separates violent extremism from terrorism.

_Radicalization_

With the distinctions of extremism and terrorism, radicalization needs to be addressed and defined. Radicalization is the process of bringing someone from simple or normal opinions about reform into extremist views on those topics (Southers, 2017). Someone is radicalized into extremism through many different channels. Radicalization can be completely self-motivated or more in tune with my themes, with the influences of others on one’s beliefs. Radicalization can be used as a word for simply being indoctrinated into a viewpoint, good or bad. However, this
paper will largely cover the process of radicalization into physical violence, so radicalization will carry a negative connotation.

**Propaganda**

The Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of *propaganda* is “The systematic dissemination of information, esp. in a biased or misleading way, in order to promote a political cause or point of view (2007).” This thesis broadens the definition a little to promote a cause or point of view. Later in the thesis, especially in the literature review, it is shown that propaganda is committed by any group of people, not just those looking for specific political gains. Propaganda can also be used in positive efforts to promote causes such as human rights, civil rights, and the treatment of others.

**Insurrection(ist)**

During and after the events on Jan 6th, 2021, to stop the certification of the 2020 presidential election, the persons involved, and the actions taken have been dubbed the January 6th *Insurrectionist* by mainstream American media (Holt and Atlantic Council’s DFRLab, 2021). While what happened during Jan 6th especially those who assaulted, harassed etc. the police and Congress people could be considered terrorist acts as some actions contained all necessary pieces, modern media has dubbed as an *insurrection*. As to not confuse anyone, I will too.

Insurrectionists, or the people involved physically with the attack and occupation of the Capitol, were a combination of QAnon supporters, Proud Boys, Three Percenters, Oath Keepers, and many non-group affiliated persons (District of Columbia v Proud Boys International, 2021 Center of Extremism, 2022 & Pape, 2021). The same persons actively partook in online forums surrounding the #stopthesteal movement. The Insurrectionists are only those who physically
showed up in Washington D.C. on January 6th, but the #stopthesteal movement had many supporters who did not attend.

**Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.**

As previously mentioned, the religious extremist group that my data will revolve around is the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Commonly abbreviated as ISIS, the group has many names associated with it, including but not limited to the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant, Daesh, and the Islamic State (Cunningham, Everton, & Schroeder, 2015). Between scholarly studies and common mainstream news outlets, the group’s most used name is ISIS, so the thesis will stick to the name ISIS for audience ease of recognition.
Literature Review

Propaganda and extremism are concepts that have persisted since war first plagued the Earth, even before humans defined the terms. There is extensive research into the histories of both areas and how they have evolved. Books of wartime tactics, scholarly articles about anti-government attacks and their aftershocks, newsletters covering how pictures from war can influence the home front, and even the pictures painted on cave walls have revolved around how one’s ideology can be twisted and used against another. The literature review is going to cover a history of propaganda, extremism literature, and a brief review of ISIS to preface their social media presence.

Propaganda Literature

Despite propaganda’s negative connotation in mainstream media, propaganda can be, and has been, used for numerous reasons across the globe. Scholars have spent centuries looking into how information can affect one’s mindset, for better or for worse. Large scale propaganda campaigns have been put into effects numerous times, especially by governments and organizations surrounding war and strife. Literature in propaganda has shifted in focus areas, as propaganda has evolved from art and porcelain drawings (Lobanov-Rostovsky, 1989) to film and radio creations (Taylor, 2013) to the modern-day social media post.

Propaganda began to influence humans before we had the modern written word. Philip Taylor’s book on propaganda (2013, pg. 19-48) expresses how Romans and Greeks in the fourth century BC centuries used “visual symbolism” and drawn pictures to exaggerate their war victories to incoming enemies. Wartime propaganda campaigns, especially surrounding World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, are largely studied by political scientists and historians for their massive effects on home fronts. In a 1927 article (pg. 627 - 631), Harold Lasswell
describes the propaganda of the 1920’s surrounding Black and white voting ideology, and how he believed attitude influenced people. While the article is viewed as aged to a modern researcher, it shows that propaganda was always on academia’s mind, even in times of global peace.

Past the World Wars and the Cold War, we continue to see propaganda seep into our lives through our technology. Academics from the 21st century that research propaganda can come from digital media experts, marketing scholars or computer data analysts. Propaganda’s reach into technology has interlinked political studies and communication & media studies in new ways. Taylor (2013, pg. 323) comments on this by saying “[the] Chinese government continues to find ways of building a great firewall to ‘protect’ its citizens from the free flow of global information, and disinformation” and shows that limiting information online can be a form of propaganda that is used today. In similar ways, private corporations online can begin to take similar steps as the Chinese government. The vast technological machines that have revolutionized how humans communicate and how we transmit information create a new platform for propaganda that will be consistently used as a tool if humans continue to use it.

**Extremism Literature**

Exactly as propaganda has been plaguing society since humans first began to build communities and cities, extremism has followed. Movement after movement have turned into extremist groups and taken steps to harm their perceived enemies. Literature surrounding extremism comes in two large forms, the study of specific movements and how they grew (or were destroyed) and the study of how extremism keeps repeating itself again.

Extremism revolves around an ‘us versus them’ mentality and scholars have tried to pinpoint the starting point of extremism; however as J.M. Berger, the author of numerous articles
and books on the topic of extremism, details the shortcomings of literature exploring how extremism starts by saying, “Decades of research have failed to answer [why do people embrace extremism] definitively, or more accurately, decades of research have carefully eliminated many proposed explanations (Berger, 2018, pg. 113).” Professors, researchers, and scholars in general cannot find a specific category or factor that definitively escalates ideology to extremist beliefs. Due to the unexplained answer to how extremism starts, scholars have created paper after paper trying and testing new theories. Due to the hardships surrounding an extremist groups origin and possible theoretical justifications, this thesis is taking in account the actions of groups after they have established themselves as extremist, and in both cases violent extremists,

On top of the lack of explanations of extremism, many other scholars have limited their research to religious extremism. This focus on one of the categories over the others, has unfortunately painted extremism as a strictly religious problem; Religious ideology that results in terrorism is not the only example of extremism; isolating the research into one area reaffirms the view point that extremism is only a problem for religious terrorists. The reality is anyone can become an extremist regardless of religion, education, homelife, relationships, etc. Extremism is so broad a topic that anything can become extremism and assuming that extremism only happens with terrorism is inaccurate.

**Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Background**

Scholars have searched into the formation, historical actions, and ideological views of ISIS since its creation in 1999. Emerging as a subsection of Al Qaeda, a terror group that attacked Western society in the 1990s, the Islamic State terrorist organization would be later responsible for the largest terror attack against the United States and quickly grow into the largest terror group in the world in our modern day (Cunningham, Everton, & Schroeder, 2015).
As ISIS started out in Al Qaeda’s shadow, the assassination of Al Qaeda’s leader Osama Bin Laden by the US military in 2011 which opened the floodgates for ISIS to begin their acceleration in recruitment of members and strength in the Middle East. ISIS flourished in the Middle East, Iraq Syria Iran etc. 2014 was a peak year for the presence of ISIS online (Cunningham, Everton, & Schroeder, 2015, pg. 15). ISIS was the focus of American military strikes and slowly decreased size and power by the modern day. ISIS was particularly effective at furthering their cause overseas by means of online propaganda and recruitment. (Berger, 2014). ISIS was a diligent and efficient terror group and created entire sectors to figure ways to manipulate social media and to get people to support their future ideas without having physical connections with the people.

**Uses and Gratifications Theory**

A mass communications theory called the Uses and Gratifications Theory has been linked to how individuals on the Internet use social media platforms. What people decide to post themselves, reblog from others, or what appears on their homepage is all influenced by what an individual receives from their time on social media platforms. While the Uses and Gratification Theory was originally created before the invention and study of the World Wide Web and the billions of communications that occur across the Internet, current scholars are bridging the gap between the theory that reflects why individuals respond to media they way they do and the newest and consistently changing form of mass media (Korhan and Ersoy, 2015). The answer of why individuals get roped into extremist groups can often be connected to what a person feels when they are found by the group, or from the gratification that comes from daily and reassuring communications, online or in-person. This theory, while not pivotal to the collection of resources, provides a solid background and theoretical standpoint for the usage of social media
sites as a platform for extremist’s groups to find persons that could be influenced and radicalized into a new viewpoint that aligns with the group’s ideology. Uses and Gratification Theory in connection with the Internet and mass communications that occurs on the web helps verify my thesis results and discussion about the radicalization process and its speed over the Internet.
Methodology

This study takes the foundation of two groups and their online presence that are distinctly opposites and establishes if the groups have anything in common in their millions of online interactions and posted propaganda despite polarizing ideologies. My overall approach was to collect sources from organizations who record information about the two groups’ online usage and public displays of information and build two separate case studies on the secondary sources. With two extremist case studies, I will lean on both qualitative sources, such as personal stories about radicalization into the groups, and quantitative data sets, such as the amount of Twitter posts that use a certain hashtag, to piece together any possible connections. The comparative light to the case studies and the usage of both styles of data will allow for positive connections to be recognized without looking for specific predetermined results. The research, both quantitative and qualitative, that will be compared was validated by the transparency of their methodology in collecting their data and by the sources which collected and analyzed it. Each source was vetted and their collection methods and rigor in test results were confirmed so the data found reflected high-quality academic work.

Limitations and Justifications

Even for non-profit academic think tanks and large organizations that found data used in my thesis, social media networks would not give up all primary data that may be related to the study. Even if I could get my hands on the data, a one-woman team can not properly analyze or assess all the content. It would take years to quantify and understand the data before making proper quantitative objectives, especially because harmful content, specific propaganda groups, and lone spreader accounts are constantly removed from numerous sites. If there is data from these groups online, they are nearly all password-protected or using top of the line end-to-end
encryption. The rest of the data is deleted. In their academic study of ISIS on Telegram, Bloom, Tiflati, and Horgan (2017, pg. 1243) point out the extra barriers to studying extremists online, the language barrier has been a primary challenge—the majority of the ISIS Telegram channels, and chat rooms operate in Arabic. For academic researchers studying online radicalization, an additional challenge has been getting university-sponsored institutional review boards (IRB) to have this research approved by their ethics committees.

While there are barriers and obstacles that occurred while collecting data and references, the limitations did not make drastic changes to the intended methodology and eventual results.

**Specific Sources of Data**

The data collected for the study are sets that databases or groups have already compiled by the following organizations or academics. J.M. Berger and partner Jonathon Morgan created a quantitative study into how ISIS used Twitter.com in 2014. The data analysis, labeled The ISIS Twitter Census (2015), had researched posts made in connection with ISIS beliefs, accounts that interacted with other ISIS members and the daily activity among numerous other analytical data collected from Twitter. The 65-page analysis paper was published by the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World. While J.M. Berger is the author with the most experience in the political and historical effects of propaganda, Jonathon Morgan was the author with a background in data sciences who could collect and analyze the complete raw data found from their search into how the terror group operated on Twitter.

As for the #stopthestean data, the Center of Extremism (2022) at the Anti-Defamation League posthumously collected data over the Internet from the dates November 3rd, 2020, to December 13th, 2021. The Center of Extremism pulled largely from Twitter but included major events and online data from the places they originated, such as on-air broadcasts that influenced
the January 6th insurrection and the political scene surrounding the November 3rd Presidential election that sparked the #stopthesteal movement to physical responses. Along with the Center of Extremism, the Just Security (Holt and Atlantic Council’s DFR lab, 2021) organization also searched into the #stopthesteal movement with more information from before the November election. The Holt and Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab created a timeline that builds to the January 6th events but not focusing on quantitative data. Since the Center of Extremism and the Just Security data could very well overlap with the other group’s data, the two sets of data will not be combined but used in separate incidents.

For some of the comparison results between ISIS and #stopthesteal, the group used to represent the #stopthesteal movement is reflected by the individuals arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigations for the Capitol Riots. The FBI collected and cataloged the persons arrested and displayed their names and charges on their websites (U.S. Attorney’s Office, 2022). For the comparison, I extrapolated the arrested persons’ gender (based on pronouns in the formal court documents) and location of where they were arrested (American state) from the court documents publicly given. These documents clearly stated pronouns and where the individual was being arrested or tried, so the public data was recorded in basic forms of Name of the Defendant, Location of Indictment, Charge(s), and Gender of the Defendant. Locations were tallied by US states (with the inclusion of Washington D.C. and a category for Unknown for anonymity for several persons) and gender was calculated as a simple addition. My data collected was put into percentages of the total and shown plainly.

Along with the quantitative data that was collected of the online social media posts involving the groups, both groups have qualitative examples of the radicalization of persons to their side. Both subjects, American women, encountered the group online and had contact with
members online consistently for months (Callimachi, 2015 and Andrews, 2020). Their stories have been publicly published with their permission, so their stories are used to compare recruitment examples.
Results

After a collection and analysis of credible sources and their individual attempts to sift through the massive amounts of extremism that occurs online, I found the following categories from both groups. Each of the results deduced from both groups have been split into categories and the corresponding groups’ results follow. Along with the written results, the findings are reflected in a table on page 23 in a simplified manner to ease comparison.

Popular Social Media Sites

ISIS used Twitter (Berger and Morgan, 2015), Archive.org (Cunningham, Everton, & Schroeder, 2015, pg. 6), justpaste.it (Cunningham, Everton, & Schroeder, 2015 pg. 6), and created an add-on to Twitter named Dawn of Glad Tidings (Berger, 2014) and has moved largely to Telegram (Bloom, Tiflati, & Horgan, 2017)

#stopthesteele largely spread across Twitter (Vogel, Auxier, & Anderson, 2021), Facebook (Holt and Atlantic Council’s DFR Lab, 2021), Parler (Holt and Atlantic Council’s DFR Lab, 2021), Telegram (Daly and Fischer, 2021) for chatting social media platforms. #stopthesteele also shifted into visual media site YouTube.

Common Hashtags and Phrases

In the search into ISIS-related hashtags across Twitter, there emerged two distinctive tactics within their propaganda, “At least 151,617 hashtags that included one of four most-common variations on the spelling of “Islamic State” in Arabic were detected (Berger and Morgan, 2015 pg. 22)”, so ISIS largely surrounded their group with its namesake. However, ISIS also ‘stole’ popular but unrelated hashtags. Whenever other topics were trending on websites, especially Twitter, the group would stage mass accounts to fill the hashtag with ISIS propaganda to spread their message to anyone who looked at the trending hashtag.

Cunningham, Everton, &
Schroeder pointed out the 2014 World Cup hashtag was flooded with ISIS propaganda, tweets, photos, videos, anything related to ISIS

The whole movement was named after the single most used hashtag, #stopthesteal, so the most common hashtags was #stopthesteal. However, the movement also used, phrases in relation to the election integrity from November 3rd such as rigged election and stolen election (Holt and Atlantic Council’s DFR Lab, 2021)

**Recruitment Styles**

ISIS recruitment over the Internet involved the creation and production of propaganda online, interacting with sympathizers or anyone that would reply to their posts, continuously message them, get target to convert to Islam, and move to their ‘caliphate’ or pieces of Iraq and Syria that were under ISIS control (Callimachi, 2015). ISIS online recruitment tactics were targeted at individuals in the Middle Eastern, African, and Western countries, anyone could be a recruit (Berger 2014, Cunningham, Everton, & Schroeder, 2015, and Turk, 2004).

#stopthesteal members produce propaganda online, largely within the United States, reach out to anyone with doubts about the November 3rd election or doubts over politicians, bring them into group chats across different sites, before moving the topic to #stopthesteal and what to do in response to the election (Holt and Atlantic Council’s DFR Lab, 2021). This pattern is also consistent with other right-wing political groups in their attempts to promote and expand their groups (Wahlstrom and Tornberg, 2019)

**Specific Recruitment Examples**

For recruitment examples, both groups managed to radicalize an American woman into their ideology, but both women were prevented from fully participating in the group’s physical activities. It was the barriers to either woman becoming a wife to an ISIS member or
participating in the January 6th insurrection that allowed for both women to tell their stories to reporters.

For example, of ISIS recruitment efforts, an American young woman approached ISIS online about a beheading video posted online. In a public and very personal anecdote that was published by the New York Times by Rukmini Callimachi in 2015, the woman detailed what life looked like while being recruited. After making initial contact with several online ISIS members who explained to her why ISIS posts graphic images and videos, she continued to be chatted with, specifically by one gentleman, over the course of months. She received gifts and Islamic books from overseas before making the move from Christianity to Islam, which she officially announced over Twitter. The young woman was in the process of being wed off to an ISIS member before legal guardians stepped in and cut off connections with her friends on Twitter and Skype.

#stopthesteal, specifically members of #stopthesteal who belonged to the QAnon ideology, recruited an American middle-aged woman. The woman, who documented her story in a memoir, told Washington Post writer Travis Andrews (2020) She found the group on a health, wellness, and spirituality website before following the ideology into other forums and different websites. The ideology moved topics as she moved sites and ended with political beliefs surrounding COVID-19 and its QAnon propaganda. After being introduced and surrounded in the beliefs, she moved into publicly declaring the ideology online on sites Instagram and Facebook. She had a public mental break that ended in physical attack of property and the involvement of law enforcement. She was briefly involuntarily hospitalized and moved away from those political beliefs all before the January 6th insurrection (Andrews, 2020).

Gender of Recruits
Based on information collected by the group New America after analysis of 715 cases based on Western public records and trials, New America (U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, 2016) found that one in eight who were radicalized, some of which attempted to leave America for Iraq and Syria, were women. That is about 12% of recruits from the public sample.

Based on the collection of persons arrested and being put on trial for the January 6th insurrection, of the 743 arrested (as of April 3rd, 2022) 102 were women. That is 13.73% of recruits who participated in breaking into the US Capitol based on public information from the U.S. Attorney’s Office (2022).

**Common Characteristics in Targets**

ISIS recruiters used their propaganda to sway “disaffected young men,” (Almutairi 2017, pg. 24) to either move to the caliphate and fight side by side with the ISIS fighters or to commit crimes to the Western society they live in. ISIS’s members also appealed to hardcore Anti-Americans, minority women in the Western world, and ‘vulnerable’ youth.

Those who were brought into group chats surrounding #stopthesteal targets Republican Americans and those on the right side of politics like Libertarians. #stopthesteal also largely alluded to the patriotic US citizens, especially military members, retired or active duty (Helderman et.al, 2021) Often the enemy of the #stopthesteal propaganda was the Democratic U.S. representatives and politicians, so anyone who despised the Democratic party, even if they were in the party previously, could be targeted.

**Locations**

Based on the collection of data from the ISIS Twitter Census (Berger and Morgan, 2015), the Twitter accounts that were found disseminating ISIS propaganda commonly placed their location on the accounts as: “Islamic State”, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.
Those arrests for the January 6th insurrection and whose public trial records were published by the U.S. Attorney’s Office (2022) in conjunction with the Department of Justice and District of Columbia Attorney’s Office, were searched and the state where the individuals resided in, and subsequently where the charges were brought, were compiled. The most common states to have persons arrested for January 6th were Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, and New York.

**Traditional Media Representation**

In American traditional media, ISIS is largely painted in an antagonistic light as ruthless killers who hated the United States and killed our soldiers (Williams, 2016). On the other side, ISIS has published traditional newspapers and flipped the American narrative to highlight American soldiers and non-Muslims as their main enemy or “infidels” that stand in the way of establishing their own country, or their “caliphate” (Turk, 2004).

#stopthesteal was in American traditional media, especially broadcasted by on-air reporters and news segments on right-wing political news channels, such as Fox News. Certain on-air broadcasters and personalities and newspaper articles with influence backed the movement and ideology which may have helped radicalization (Center of Extremism, 2022 and Holt and Atlantic Council’s DFR Lab, 2021).

**Twitter Usage**

Many sources that emerged in my collection of ISIS and #stopthesteal material referenced Twitter specifically. Since the website was prominent for both groups, there are some comparisons that are related strictly to Twitter usage. Limiting the data to one website can help to determine if any patterns emerge rather than some coincidences between social media usage.

**Timeline of Watched Twitter Data**
The major source that recorded ISIS propaganda on Twitter was the ISIS Twitter Census. The authors Cunningham, Everton, & Schroeder (2015) only collected and studied media data from Twitter.com. Their analysis followed ISIS Twitter activity from October 4, 2014, to November 27, 2014.

For the #stopthesteal movement, the Anti-Defamation League’s Center on Extremism (2022) monitored the activity of #stopthesteal on Twitter from November 3rd, 2020, to December 13th, 2021.

*Tweets within Time Limit*

The ISIS Twitter Census found a total of 5,384,892 tweets that referenced the terror group with the multitude of hashtags, coded words, or visual propaganda.

The Center for Extremism found 200,270 tweets that specifically “mentioned the phrases “stop the steal,” “rigged election,” or “stolen election,” or used #stopthesteal (2022).”

*Twitter Account Suspension*

A U.S. Senate Hearing to the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs (2016, pg. 3) surrounding the dangers posed by allowing online extremism to escalate physical violence in the US mentioned that more 100,000 ISIS-linked accounts were banned on Twitter.

The Center of Extremism (2022) found that 150,000 accounts that were linked with QAnon were banned from Twitter. It is important to note that QAnon was correlated to the January 6th insurrection but was established and viral online before the election.
Table of Comparison of Data Found

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Popular Sites</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Twitter, Dawn of Glad Tidings app, Archive.org, Justpaste.it</td>
<td>Twitter, Parler, Telegram, Facebook/Instagram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hashtags</td>
<td>Posted propaganda to any trending hashtags - 151,167 ISIS – specific hashtags used one of four spellings of ISIS</td>
<td>#stopthestean main hashtags – the phrases rigged election and stolen election commonly found with the hashtag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment Style</td>
<td>Propaganda online, responding to sympathizers or comments on propaganda, continuously message and talk to them directly, convert them to Islam, and move them to the Middle East.</td>
<td>Propaganda online, reaching out to anyone who will listen/potential recruits and bring them into group chats, change the topic, and motivate them to attend January 6th insurrection.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific Recruitment Example</td>
<td>Woman talked to ISIS supporters asking questions, continued to be chatted with, got gifts and books from overseas sympathetic, converted to Islam, and contact ended before the woman could be wed.</td>
<td>Woman found on health and wellness blog, moved to other forums on social media, declared ideology (pre-election), online call to action, and public mental break that led to involuntary hospitalization and removal from the ideology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>1 in 8 radicalized in attempts to move to the Middle East for groups were women.</td>
<td>Of those arrested, 13.73% were women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional Media</td>
<td>US, English speaking, media commonly antagonistic not using ISIS’s propaganda</td>
<td>Used a good chunk of on-air broadcasting and influential persons backing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Characteristics of Targets</td>
<td>Disgruntled Westerns, anti-American Muslims, and women to become soldier’s wives.</td>
<td>Largely Republican or Liberation political party focus and military members active or retired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locations</td>
<td>Location of Accounts - “Islamic State” Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Location of Arrests Florida, Texas, New York</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweets with time limit</td>
<td>A total of 5,384,892 tweets with ISIS-related information collected</td>
<td>A total of 200,270 tweets with several election phrases collected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter Account Suspension</td>
<td>More than 100,00 ISIS-linked accounts suspended</td>
<td>More than 150,000 QAnon-linked accounts suspended</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion

While the two groups, ISIS and #stopthesteal do not share ideologies, there are several places from the results where similar answers were found. Some statistical numbers were remarkably close to the others, i.e., the percent of women, but a larger theme emerged in front of the statistics. Some sections had no real connection with the other’s answers but recruitment style, websites used, and account suspensions all showed resemblance.

A major part of the comparative study is the implications that arise with the similarities between two distinctive groups. The most passionate supporters of these two groups would hate, loathe each other. In some cases, the two might have attempted to kill the other in their own sense of patriotic ideology. With such dedication between members with a deep-rooted sense of faith and driven passion, the assumption would be that the two groups would operate in different manners in total opposites. If two groups with opposing ideologies are manipulating social media in similar ways, then new and emerging groups are likely to continue this pattern. Recognizing extremism before it can escalate to violence is crucial. In some cases, such as the two recruitment examples, close friends and family step in before someone, the individual or innocent bystanders, can be harmed. In 2019, one man entered an Orlando nightclub and killed forty-nine people. After an investigation into his ties to the ISIS terror group, the agency explicitly stated that it is “highly confident" that the Orlando killer [. . .] was ‘radicalized at least in part through the Internet’.” (U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee, 2016, pg. 2). Finding out that the killer was radicalized online after the fact does not immediately deter others from being radicalized.

Disadvantages to the Results

The problem is these results do not tell us how to solve the problem of circulating extremism online, they only demonstrate how much worse it could be. Online social media
algorithms are private intellectual property owned and protected by the largest corporations on the planet. While these sites have addressed the major problems that stir up on their sites, the sites are not physically responsible for the ensuing violence and are not forced to change anything on their websites. Across the years 2018-2021, several employees from Facebook brought forth concerns involving Facebook lack of accountability surrounding its effects on its users. One of the women who emerged in 2021 quit from her position on the civic misinformation section of the company released thousands of documents showing Facebook’s mishandling of misinformation surrounding the 2020 election (Mac and Kang). After Facebook was on the front pages of news outlets as the whistleblower met with US Senators and the US Security and Exchange Commission, many other sites have taken precautions to avoid being caught with allowing the material on their sites. As more violence could be created, circulated, and planned on social media websites, those same websites could be the focus of large lawsuits by human rights organizations or the victims of the violence for the site's inadvertent role in the crimes. Although online social media networks have a large responsibility to curb extremism on their sites, a simple technological algorithm will not stop extremists. In the book, the Propaganda Model Today (Pedro-Carañana, Broudy, and Klaehn, 2018, pg. 84), the authors criticized the use of older models and theories surrounding new online propaganda and quote, “[There is] no technological fix to political and socio-economic problems”.

On top of the social media’s role in filtering through hate, individuals online are set up to be swept into these groups. With social media being consumed by 10-year-olds and 80-year-olds, there is an incredibly large population pool that extremists can fish through to find the people vulnerable to manipulation and rhetoric, or persons already willing to commit violence but without cause. Anyone is allowed on social media, but there is a large burden on those who
choose to be online to understand that websites are not the only entity interested in collecting your information. The assumption that one can be on social media websites independently of anyone else’s influence is negligent to the numerous groups online that target anyone they can. The usage of two groups that do not resemble the other in ideology for the study was incredibly important to showcasing that the targeting of ‘average’ people on the Internet is not a tactic used by one specific group, or specific ideology. With the large pool of recruits, websites that specifically trap its user into groups, and anonymity as a number one priority for websites, social media is a breeding ground for turning stay-at-home moms, 9-5 office workers, recently unemployed men, married couples with six kids, or anyone else into extremists.

**Recommendations of What to Do Next**

Organizations with the time and resources to track and watch trends that emerge with groups needed to put forth the work to recognize prominent groups with violent tendencies. While US and world law enforcement agencies are tracking terrorist and following tips about possible extremists, law enforcement is a reactionary tool. Preventative measures are possible, and the similarities between these groups show that patterns are possible to see (at least posthumously).

Every aspect of research into social media, whether it be communications, marketing, political action, or anywhere else that social media can influence, is begging for more research into social media. Political theory sees strong correlations between social media and the development of political discourse, campaigning and election polling, how we develop our political ideas and how we find our evidence for those ideas (Vogel, Auxier, and Anderson, 2021). The data displays that social media is not a stagnant entity that can be studied when researchers have the time and resources. Between 2011 and 2021, two groups with varying
endgames managed to manipulate the Internet, namely Twitter, in similar fashions to the same results, physical violence and death. 3 months is all the time needed to rowdy nearly seven hundred people into committing felonies against the US government; all other factors such as ideology, willingness, legitimacy of the issue and connections were already established or developed and wielded within three months. With social media sites in the hot seat as the US Congress attempts to understand how these private corporations are influencing propaganda and hate on their websites. While the US government and private corporations lock antlers in legal battles, researchers, scientists, and intellectuals need to invest the same amount of passion into social media. The tangled, confusing, complex mess that has evolved into the Internet we use today is not independent of any field of study. Political theorists have already pushed for study, as does this paper. There is only so much an analysis of online radicalization of US citizens that occurs without accessible data through website accessibility in connection with extremism and others to shift through and interpret the mass amounts of data that can be found across the Internet. 3 months is significantly less time than researchers will need to begin understanding just how much politics can be influenced by social media, but that has been proven an effective timeline for the Internet to turn the average American business owner with a white picket fence family into criminals who attacked US Capitol Police Officers before breaking into the US Capitol.

On top of the rapid escalation of online extremist effectiveness in recruiting ‘average’ citizens into their ideology, the lack of defined line in the sand of what is the starting point of radicalization is an area of study in desperate need of understanding. Radicalization is not an inherently negative process; it can teach us humility, inclusion and diversity, the necessary pieces that can fight violent extremism. Radicalization and extremism that expand past its past
uses and understanding how people wield them as weapons is the beginning to finding peace before violence becomes the answer.
Conclusion

Online extremism is rapidly growing and the barriers that are placed in its way, with the nature of account suspension and banning education about bots and how sites operate. While the radicalization process has adapted into online platforms, there are ways to fight the changes in person. The US Senate Hearings (2016) about the growing extremist groups online and social media recruitment found that,

While the radicalization and recruitment can start online, what [the FBI investigations] have seen and what the data shows … individuals around someone who is being radicalized - - friends, neighbors, peers, associates - - see some type of behavior who is being radicalized.

While there are obstacles to combat and fight against the modernization and technological shifts in propaganda and recruitment messages, these efforts are not enough to curb the ease that groups can manipulate and target the websites to radicalize individuals. With social media algorithm, a vast pool of potential candidates, and public strong feelings about a variety of issues on the extremist’s side, the problems are not going away; they are growing.

My thesis found that the timeline necessary to radicalize an individual to make major life changes, moving to a completely different part of the world or committing felonies and going to prison, significantly shortened, and the group that perturbates the radicalization process did not need a devout following or defined group dynamic before growing and recruiting online. The similarities that arose in my comparative study between ISIS and #stopthesteal’s online presence defied their ideological differences and innate hatred for one another. Their tactics and strategies were used based on the efficiency and swiftness that allowed for recruitment.

An abundance of research into the Internet and the interactions that can occur on social media websites. There are multitudes of topics, studies, and focus areas that can gain knowledge and resources from starting to record information online by research colleges and institutions or
non-profit organization; the untapped potential of study and the possible life-changing effects that would result could shape how we use the Internet for the rest of time and groups need to start their examinations now. The Internet has become a global, unpredictable, and omnipotent being that our culture has become irreversibly tied to. Letting the web run rampant and unwatched will result in unpredictable, turbulent, and deadly consequences.
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