Mountains of Evidence: Processual "Redpilling" as a Sociotechnical Effect of Disinformation

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How do people come to believe far-right, extremist, and conspiratorial ideas they encounter online? This paper examines how participants in primarily US-based far-right online communities describe their adoption of "redpill" beliefs and the role of disinformation in these accounts. Applying the sociotechnical theory of media effects, we conduct qualitative content analysis of "redpilling narratives" gathered from Reddit, Gab, and Discord. While many users frame redpilling as a moment of conversion, others portray redpilling as a process, something achieved incrementally through years of community participation and "doing your own research." In both cases, disinformation presented as evidence and the capacity to determine the veracity of presented evidence play important roles in redpilling oneself and others. By framing their beliefs as the rational and logical results of fully considering a plethora of evidence, redpill adherents can justify holding and promoting otherwise indefensible prejudices. The community's creation, promotion, and repetition of far-right disinformation, much of which is historical or "scientific" in nature, play a crucial role in the adoption of far-right beliefs.

Keywords: online radicalization, far-right, extremism, disinformation, evidence, redpill

This paper discusses the relationship between disinformation and "online radicalization." Understanding how Americans come to believe extremist, far-right, and conspiratorial beliefs they encounter online is an important sociopolitical issue, especially when such beliefs result in political violence, such as mass shootings or the January 6th assault on the U.S. Capitol. This ideological adoption and justification of violence is primarily understood as "radicalization," a concept formulated by scholars and government actors after 9/11 to understand jihadi terrorism (Ahmed & Lynch, 2021). The typical narrative of online radicalization involves an innocent young person being exposed to online content that causes them to adopt extremist beliefs or, at worst, commit political violence. However, fifty years of communication research on media effects indicates people are not simply brainwashed by media, no matter how extreme (Marwick, 2018; Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). Moreover, radicalization research is marked by uncertainty, with extensive research failing to find common psychological or social causes for extremism, a link between extremist ideology and behavior, or a common pathway from mainstream to extremist thought or political violence (Marwick et al., 2022).

In contrast to concepts of radicalization which resemble the far-right's understanding of the "redpill" as a single, transformative moment of conversion (Munn, 2019), previous research suggests the adoption of extremist beliefs is a gradual process of socialization (Luger, 2022; Miller-Idriss, 2020). The far-right's endorsement of white supremacy and racism holds historical, normative precedent in the United States, so framing these ideas as *radical* is misleading. Moreover, mainstreaming these beliefs is a primary strategy of American far-right political actors and groups, known as "metapolitics" (Stern, 2019). This strategy has been successful. Key far-right ideas, such as the "Great Replacement Theory," in which white people are strategically "replaced" by immigrants and ethnic minorities, are now espoused by American fringe groups and right-wing media and political elites alike, such as Fox pundit Tucker Carlson and Republican Representative Matt Gaetz (Ekman, 2022).

However, not enough is known about how people come to adopt extremist ideas in online contexts. This is particularly true given the online prevalence of far-right disinformation spread strategically to recruit new people to extremist movements (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). In this paper, we draw from a textual corpus of "redpilling narratives" from Reddit, Gab, and

Discord in which people discuss their conversion to extremist ideas to understand how members of extremist communities frame their own ideological journeys. In addition to their self-description, we analyze how community participants marshal and evaluate evidence to understand the relationship between online disinformation and the adoption of extremist beliefs.[2] While we draw from English-speaking communities primarily comprised of Americans, given the global reach of English-language far-right movements, our insights into how people take on far-right beliefs likely apply to wider populations (Mudde 2019).

Analyzing how members of these communities narrate their own conversions reveals that some participants describe the adoption of their beliefs as an *event,* a "redpill moment." Others use "the redpill" to denote the beginning of their journey and instead consider the redpill to be a *process.* We argue that the far-right's concept of the "redpill as event" does important ideological work. In telling stories of how they took on extremist beliefs, members of these communities legitimize racist and misogynist disinformation as scientific, accurate, and convincing. However, in contrast to the stereotype of "redpills" as mind-blowing facts that cause instantaneous conversion, most narratives show that taking on extremist beliefs is an ongoing process of socialization requiring repeated exposure to such content. Characterizing socialization as "redpilling"—or, for that matter, "radicalization"—reinforces the idea that racist and hateful beliefs have an uncanny ability to instantly change minds and that extremist communities are distinctly different from all other types of social and political groups. Our data suggests otherwise.

In both cases, "evidence" plays a key role in the conversion. This evidence is widely available in far-right spaces, and includes, in addition to videos, podcasts, memes, and other social media content, books, academic papers, charts and graphs, statistics, and other "proof" of white superiority, Jewish perfidy, female promiscuity, and general biological essentialism. We consider this "evidence" disinformation. Participants' sense of themselves as intelligent, rational, scientific individuals with deep commitments to truth and research underlies and justifies their adoption of racist, anti-Semitic, misogynist, or otherwise hateful views as the logical result of evaluating sufficient evidence. Thus, disinformation plays a key role in the spread of far-right views. Learning to view it as *evidence* through the adoption of anti-Black,

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[2] We use "participants" to mean "participants in online communities," not "participants in our study."

anti-Semitic, and anti-feminist frames is a crucial part of the socialization process into far-right communities.

Literature Review

Taking the Redpill

The "redpill" originates from *The Matrix* film franchise. In the original film, the protagonist Neo must choose whether to take a blue pill and return to a fabricated world of material comfort, or take a red pill and awaken to an unsettling reality. Neo chooses the red pill and immediately wakes up to find himself in a pod, serving as a human battery to alien invaders while living inside a computer simulation. The massively successful franchise popularized the term "redpill" as the ability to see hidden, uncomfortable truths or stigmatized knowledge in conflict with more "mainstream" beliefs (Chapelan, 2021). It was widely adopted by pick-up artists and other male supremacist communities after Rollo Tomassi used it in his 2013 self-help book *The Rational Male*. Tomassi's "redpill" describes abandoning feminist ideas in favor of regressive concepts of women as naturally promiscuous, status-obsessed, manipulative, and superficial. This "redpill philosophy" unifies the otherwise diverse manosphere, an interlinked web of communities disdaining and denigrating women and characterized by a strong emphasis on biological bases to gender and social behavior, pseudo-scientific rationality, a chilly market-based approach to sexual relationships, and a view of women as commodities (Ging, 2019; Van Valkenburgh, 2021).

Following its adoption throughout the manosphere, the redpill became a core component of far-right participatory culture (Dignam & Rohlinger, 2019). In such communities, far-right denizens position themselves against sheep-like "normies" who must be "redpilled." In other words, far-right adherents are obligated to introduce the more extreme elements of their ideologies to a broader audience (Chapelan, 2021; Marwick & Lewis, 2017). This is especially true given the urgency intrinsic to many far-right and extremist communities, which believe their way of life—be it white, male, Christian, or heterosexual—is under immediate threat. True to its cinematic origins, in such communities the "redpill" is usually framed as an "awakening" and singular event of conversion (Munn, 2019).

While far-right extremists vary in the specifics and expression of their beliefs, members consistently believe that white people are in danger from immigrants, people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, or Muslims; that their country was better off in the past; and that the mainstream media are lying (Isom et al., 2021). Previous research has found people adopt such beliefs for several reasons. They may be dissatisfied with mainstream conservatism, consider far-right ideologies to be rebellious or "edgy," and/or view them as providing a positive white, masculine identity (Kutner, 2020). Many participate peripherally in far-right movements, perhaps embracing the self-improvement aspects of the "Western chauvinist" Proud Boys or the male supremacist communities, but not engaging more seriously (DeCook, 2019).

Technology has consistently been identified as a source of far-right radicalization through exposure to extremist information, from search engines like Google, to mainstream social media sites like YouTube and Facebook, to conservative niche sites like Telegram, Gab, and Parler (Baele et al., 2020; Hosseinmardi et al., 2021; Urman & Katz, 2022). Notably, little of this scholarship defines or adopts a particular model of radicalization, instead assuming the mere existence of extreme content online will lead people to take on extremist beliefs (Marwick et al., 2022). Radicalization, however, is a very active area of research with multiple, competing models of radicalization (Borum, 2011; Horgan, 2008). These include the multi-stage process "pyramid" and "pathways" models (McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008); a top-down process by which impressionable youth are groomed by older and more established extremists (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009); and the "bunch of guys" theory which involves peer networks (Sageman, 2008). Given that kinship and friendship ties are important roads to involvement in high-risk activist and political activities, social media may be a crucial part of this process (Lindekilde et al., 2019; McAdam, 1986). However, we lack a definitive model of how far-right social networks contribute to the uptake of far-right beliefs.

The relationship between exposure to extremist information and extremist beliefs is unknown and a key research question in the field (Hassan et al., 2018; Odag et al., 2019). While participation in far-right social media communities likely expands far-right beliefs, *how* this happens is even less understood (Costello & Hawdon, 2018; Youngblood, 2020). In contrast to the "exposure=belief" layperson's model of far-right online radicalization, a comprehensive review of the literature shows there is a gradual process by which people come to believe extremist ideas and justify violence in service of them. This involves adopting a community's

"identity frames, affect, and meaning-making," framing social problems as injustices that can be blamed on outgroup members, and justifying political violence as a remedy (Marwick et al., 2022; McDonald 2018). The Internet contributes to this process by connecting people to like-minded others, increasing their exposure to these ideas, and acclimating them to extremist ideas through repetition. Given that we are interested in how this process relates to *media* as an agent of political socialization, particularly *social media,* we are curious as to how members of extremist communities make meaning of their own participation. While narratives are told for the benefit of an audience and cannot necessarily be taken as truthful, they reveal important "deep stories" (Hochschild, 2016) that reflect community norms and values, identify key influences on contemporary extremist thought, and reveal elements of the process by which people adopt extremist ideas. Therefore, we ask:

RQ1: How do participants in far-right, extremist, and conspiratorial social media communities describe the adoption of their beliefs?

Far-Right Disinformation

In the United States, the election of Donald Trump to the presidency prompted an enormous increase in public and academic concerns around "fake news" and "misinformation," much of it presuming Trump's success was related to, if not dependent upon, the newfound prominence of incorrect information (Read, 2016). Trump's candidacy was also marked by the return of far-right groups, individuals, and ideas to mainstream American politics. Trump appointed far-right political actors like Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller to prominent positions; approvingly referenced the Proud Boys during a debate; and amplified social media generated by QAnon and far-right accounts. His policies were similarly coherent with far-right ideals. He attempted to create a "Muslim ban," proposed an end to birthright citizenship, and issued a memorandum banning most transgender people from military service (Gonzales & Raphelson, 2018; Lyons, 2019).

The multiparty system in much of Europe allows for the existence of far-right and radical right political parties, but the entrenched two-party system in the United States requires different political strategies (Mudde, 2019). The American far-right has thus embraced "metapolitics," a focus on cultural change through political discourse as a way of

mainstreaming ultraconservative ideologies (Stern, 2019). In the run-up to the 2016 election, highly-educated white nationalist Richard Spencer sought to rhetorically distance himself from lower-class racist subcultures like skinheads or Klansmen; the "alt-right" was a successful rebrand of extremist and Neo-Nazi ideas as middle-class and respectable (Stern, 2019). While far-right ideas have never been far from the American forefront, they have new visibility and relevance in American discourse. [3]

Globally, social media is a primary space where far-right actors popularize their ideas, recruit new members, and spread talking points (Karell et al., 2023; Wahlström & Törnberg, 2021). Far-right actors also rely on frames, statistics, and literature linked to prejudicial pseudoscience, a phenomenon with longstanding precedent in the western world (Daniels, 1997; Hakenbeck, 2019). Through veneers of quantitative abstraction and scientific terminology, scientists—predominantly white, male, and well-to-do—have long worked in tandem with other systems of power to justify the oppression of nonwhite, nonmale, and otherwise marginalized communities (Fischer et al., 1996; Gould, 1996). Though less overt, scientific racism, sexism, and other prejudices continue to circulate in legitimated academic arenas, disguised through obscure terminology and abstraction (Bliss, 2018; Saini, 2019). Researchers have noted the potential dangers related to essentializing racial differences and the legitimation of scientific racism within academia (Panofsky & Donovan, 2019; Phelan et al., 2013). Rebranded as "race realism," scientific racism has been leveraged by right-wing influencers to advocate for racist viewpoints in debates broadcast to their audiences via platforms like YouTube (Lewis, 2018).

We position this far-right propaganda as *disinformation*, in keeping with Freelon & Wells' definition of disinformation as false or misleading information strategically spread for political or ideological goals, to create harm, or for profit (2020). Successful disinformation narratives often draw from long-standing ideologies of racial inequality or other power differentials to appeal to white identities (Ong, 2021; Reddi et al., 2021). Thus, we conceptualize forms of knowledge generated about marginalized groups to reinforce forms of

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[3] Several of the communities we studied explicitly defined themselves as "alt-right," but many more did not. Today, the term has fallen out of favor. We use the term "far-right" as an umbrella term for white nationalist, male supremacist, and alt-right supporters.

racial inequality *as* disinformation (Kuo & Marwick, 2021). However, the relationship between such disinformation and the adoption of extremist beliefs is unclear. We ask:

RQ2: What role does *disinformation* play in the adoption of extremist, far-right, and white supremacist beliefs?

Sociotechnical Theory of Media Effects

In this paper we frame extremist information as *disinformation* and ask how people come to believe it. Rather than adopting a frame of "radicalization," we use the Sociotechnical Theory of Media Effects to understand redpilling as a combination of *actors, messages,* and *technical affordances* (Marwick, 2018). This model assumes actors interpret information based on their identity, social position, familiarity with social discourses, and literacy; that media messages are polysemous but structured for specific agendas; and that the material affordances of media technologies affect both how individuals interpret information and how media producers shape messaging. Thus, when considering radicalization as an *effect* of disinformation, we must understand the *actors* (people searching for, interested in, or consuming disinformation); the *messages* (what disinformation is about and how this is presented); and the *affordances* of technologies on which disinformation is spread and consumed. This paper is concerned with the *actors* (members of far-right and extremist online communities) and the *messages* (far-right disinformation) they consume. We undertook an ambitious qualitative analysis project to understand the relationship between *disinformation* and *the adoption of extremist beliefs.*

Data and Methods

To better understand the adoption of extremist ideas, we assembled a corpus of "redpilling" narratives drawn from Reddit, Gab, and Discord where online posters discuss their journeys to extremism. We chose Reddit for its prominence in previous studies; Gab as a key space for far-right ideas; and Discord to understand community discussions in context. All communities we studied use the term "redpill" to describe their ideological adoption, and include white supremacists, male supremacists, more mainstream conservatives, self-avowed members of the alt-right, and QAnons. While these communities differ in focus, there is

considerable thematic overlap, consistent with research emphasizing the convergence between the alt-right, male supremacism, QAnon, and white supremacy (Forberg, 2022; Pruden et al., 2022). These themes included the superiority of white people, white culture, and men; the threat to groups from inferior others, including Muslims, feminists, Jews, people of color, and immigrants; and conceptualizing LGBTQ+ identities, particularly transgender and nonbinary people, as a form of harmful mental illness. These beliefs were stated explicitly in some groups and implicitly in others. For example, participants in the_donald were more likely to reflect Islamophobia or transphobia than outright white supremacy, most likely due to the relative acceptability of such ideas.

All analyzed communities are English-speaking. Because these platforms are pseudonymous, we lack demographic information. Context clues suggest they are mostly white American men. However, the corpus includes explicitly non-American groups (such as the white nationalist subreddit r/European and Discord servers devoted to Eastern European ecofascist group Greenline Front and South African politics) and participants frequently identified themselves as European, South African, Australian, or otherwise non-American.

Data Collection

We collected data from 14 subreddits and Gab using the Pushshift API and used leftist group Unicorn Riot's Discord data to collect narratives from 129 different far-right Discords. This resulted in 153 text documents of 7,005,047 total words.[4]

Reddit

Reddit is a network of community forums on a wide variety of topics known as "subreddits." 48% of its users come from the United States, 7% from the United Kingdom, 7% from Canada, and the remaining 36% from around the world (Bianchi, 2023b). Reddit data were obtained via the Pushshift Reddit API[5] and focused on thematically relevant subreddits. The subreddits discuss alt-right (DebateAltRight, altright, and milliondollarextreme), male

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[4] Tables outlining dataset characteristics and terms lists are available at https://osf.io/3up28/
[5] https://pushshift.io

supremacist (MGTOW, MensRights), QAnon (greatawakening), and/or white supremacist (DarkEnlightenment, european, WhiteNationalism) ideologies. We also included The_Donald, a subreddit for fans of former President Trump, given its important role in far-right online discourse (Gaudette et al., 2021). Three subreddits serve as support groups for formerly-redpilled individuals (exredpill), or family and friends of those enmeshed in QAnon or Fox News rhetoric (QAnonCasualties and FoxBrain). While not exhaustive, the variety of subreddits—and multiple, interlinking ideologies represented therein—allowed us to analyze a wide array of redpilling narratives across Reddit.

We used multiple terms lists to excerpt texts discussing either the process of "being redpilled" or the process of "going down the rabbit hole" (which can refer to taking on extreme beliefs or online research). To extract the most relevant texts from each subreddit, and because terminology varies across communities, texts were collected with either a broader or narrower "redpill" terms list.

Gab

Gab is an "alt-tech" American micro-blogging site primarily popular among far-right and conservative users in the United States (74% of its user base) (Jasser et al., 2023; Similarweb, 2023). We chose Gab for its noted prevalence of "hateful, radical, antisemitic, right-wing, and conspiratorial actors and content" (Mahl et al., 2023). We collected Gab data via the Pushshift archives,[6] which make Gab data from August 2016 to October 2018 available for public use.

Discord

Data from Reddit and Gab were supplemented with data scraped from far-right Discord servers leaked by the leftist collective Unicorn Riot (Unicorn Riot, 2022). Discord is a chat application popular with gamers and young people around the world; 60-70% of their users are outside the United States (Bianchi, 2023a). Unicorn Riot is a non-profit collective of activist journalists whose mission is to "engage and amplify the stories of social and environmental struggles from the ground up" (Dowling, 2021; Unicorn Riot, 2021). There are many complex ethical questions about using leaked or hacked data for research, with most scholars advising

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[6] https://files.pushshift.io/gab/

against it (Boustead & Herr, 2020; Thomas et al., 2017). After much consideration, we chose to use this dataset as it provided us with *in situ* conversations in far-right spaces. We justify the choice of this dataset for four reasons. First, it is publicly available and easily searchable. Second, it has been cited in other academic papers and the popular press (Berger et al., 2020; Blout & Burkart, 2021). Third, the ethical considerations of studying far-right groups are different from more vulnerable populations as these groups aggressively engage in online harassment and frequently target academic researchers, especially women, LGBTQ+ people, and people of color (Massanari, 2018). Finally, there is a strong public interest in understanding how and why people become involved in far-right groups. According to Unicorn Riot, all the Discord servers are "connected to the wider far-right in a manner that makes the chat's publication serve the public interest. Not every individual user shown in the logs is necessarily a white supremacist; however, any chat server whose logs we publish is connected in some way to far-right activity" (Unicorn Riot, 2022). To minimize identification and possible harm to the Discord participants, we redacted all usernames and identifiable information (such as hometown) in quoted material. We extracted 4,773 conversations across 129 Discord servers. Dates of submission ranged from August 19, 2016, to March 14, 2021.

As with Reddit and Gab data, we employed key search terms to refine Discord data collection. To better follow conversations, we extracted the 20 messages prior to and following the chat messages with key terms. We occasionally returned to the full Unicorn Riot database to collect additional messages if a fruitful conversation was circumscribed by this method, or to obtain relevant visual material that did not appear in our textual corpus.

Finally, we collected archived material referred to as "redpills" in different Discords. This included links to hyper-partisan and mainstream news sources, links to social media posts, academic articles, books, memes, infographics, PDFs, and a "Library of Hate" document with "700 hatefacts (politically incorrect but true statements) on Islam, race, gender relations, ethnocentrism, diversity, and more."

Data Analysis

We analyzed the textual data using qualitative content analysis. First, we generated a preliminary codebook based on our previous research, scholarly literature, and a close reading

of the redpill narratives collected from Reddit. During line-by-line coding of the entire corpus, the codebook was further refined and reorganized, using an abductive approach to analysis to add new codes and develop emerging themes (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Preliminary codes included *Redpill-description* (how participants described their redpilling) and *Redpilled-by* (what caused someone to take on extremist beliefs); these were subsequently fleshed with a set of subcodes for each category. We also coded for *Redpill-effects* (on relationships and mental health), *Redpill-other uses* (interesting uses of the term besides conversion), *Redpill-preconditions* (what made the person susceptible to redpilling), and, as we continued, codes dealing with *Epistemology, Evidence, Doing Own Research, and Intelligence/Rationality.* Thus, the codebook served as a mental map of our thinking as the project progressed. We frequently wrote memos about interesting or provocative examples and discussed the coding process weekly. All quotes are reproduced verbatim except for slurs, which we have replaced with asterixis.

Narratives of Redpilling

Our first research question asks, "How do participants in far-right, extremist, and conspiratorial social media communities describe the adoption of their beliefs?" While many participants described their adoption of extremist ideology as a standalone "eureka" moment, a process of socialization took place both before and after this conversion. We refer to this as *processual redpilling* and find that conversion is often part of a broader process of political socialization into extremist or far-right beliefs.

Redpill as a Moment of Conversion

Frequently, participants discussed being redpilled as a single moment of conversion. One Gab user writes: "Most people refuse to see the truth, dismissing mountains of evidence. when their brain finally goes click, it's something truly beautiful, an instant of enlightenment, that: 'redpill moment.'" Here, the underlying belief is that enough exposure to "mountains of evidence" will lead to the subject adopting these views. There is *so much* evidence, and it is *so convincing,* that it is just a matter of time until it creates a new redpilled subject. This is supported by the overwhelming amounts of material circulated in these communities, from hundreds of hours of YouTube documentaries to "terabytes of redpills" linked on Discord.

This quote also suggests that such evidence must be repeated to convert others. However, some narratives describe evidence so convincing that repetition is unnecessary, such as one The_Donald user: "redpilling is a incredible process, just need one time of good hearing and evidence and bam, process is done." When a receptive subject hears the "truth," this poster suggests, they can be instantly converted.

In other narratives, the subject's exposure to an online community creates the conversion. Notably, while most studies of online communities describe a longer process of socialization that begins with lurking or forms of legitimate peripheral participation (Yeow et al., 2006), many accounts we analyzed framed the discovery of the community as a redpill *moment*:

> so, i actually was red pilled in may. that morning i was my normal self, watching this and that on tv. looking at the tv intermittently among my normal sat housekeeping around the house stuff..so, then, that day, i discovered q. and reddit. and everything else. and it changed me, in a weird but good way. i'm still grateful every day that god let me be awake.

> i'll never forget that day. i was greeted by americanism and memes and patriotism and love for our country and pepe and actually discovered i was alot more conservative than i once thought. i got on board the trump train, put on my coat and grabbed a few bricks that day and never looked back. i fell in love with trump.

These participants discuss being changed by their discovery of different subreddits: QAnon and The_Donald, respectively. Such communities are characterized by repetition of disinformation over time. Even though both individuals view redpilling as a moment of conversion, this is prompted by immersion in an online space with consistent norms and values expressed through shared content.

Both accounts are very emotional. The first poster expresses immense gratitude for their conversion, while the second refers to a process of falling in love with Trump and

discovering a "love for our country" (perhaps ironically, but it is impossible to tell).[7] These strong affective dimensions indicate that involvement in these communities appeals to deep emotional states. This is consistent with the work of sociologist Kevin McDonald, who characterizes radicalization as a process by which an individual takes on a community's *way of feeling,* or the dominant emotions and sensations of a group that make it possible to "think certain things" (2018, p. 15). The above two accounts show how this emotional affect can be leveraged in narratives recalling moments of conversion.

Redpill as Process

Other people viewed their own conversion to far-right or extremist ideas as a gradual process. One Gab participant explains:

don't sell yourself short
but also don't rush yourself
it has taken me years to learn what i know, put all the pieces together and to
learn how to articulate it effectively and i'm still learning.
 i consider it holy work and i take it quite seriously.
it is a lifelong journey, a continuous process, so pace yourself.
read 30 mins a day and listen to good podcasts when you have time and you
can make a big dent on this stuff sooner than you think!

To this poster, being "redpilled" is a lifelong learning journey that requires "keeping your skills sharp when trying to red pill normies." It involves reading, listening to podcasts, and consuming other extremist content which he categorizes as "holy work," highlighting the urgency of far-right ideals in the minds of their adherents.

In other cases, people describe adopting extremist beliefs over longer periods of exposure. One Discord participant says, "I was born in 2002 and was raised as a genuine communist. I took my first red pill on feminism, then on leftism, then on cuckservatism. This

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[7] It is impossible to definitively determine the intentions behind any of the texts we analyzed, but these narratives are all capable of contributing to the socialization processes outlined in this paper.

was of course over the span of several years, but I don't think I'm changing any time soon." In this case, anti-feminist thought served as a "gateway" from communism to mainstream conservatism ("cuckservatism"), and then other extremist ideologies, to the point where the participant now regularly takes part in a neo-Nazi chat room. This is consistent with research showing anti-feminism is frequently a gateway to political violence and racist thought (Pruden et al., 2022).

Other participants began by consuming the edgy and ironic humor that characterized "alt-right" spaces like 4chan and 8chan, but then took on these beliefs sincerely:

> Participant 1: Yeah and then I saw ppl negging Jews so I joined in as a meme first off
> Participant 1: Then all of a sudden it stopped being a meme
> Participant 2: so you were only doing it ironically at first?
> Participant 2: ironic nazi?
> Participant 1: Well sort of
> Participant 1: I knew they were weird ppl
> Participant 1: And ran everything
> Participant 1: But I wasn't a holotoaster [Holocaust] denier and shit yet
> Participant 1: That was the fattest red pill

In this example, the participant took part in an online community that, like many so-called "alt-lite" online spaces, cloaked actual Nazism and anti-Semitism in "ironic Nazism." This is a well-known recruitment strategy to appeal to disaffected young men and position racism as rebellion against a stultifying, politically correct culture. The participant above "negged Jews" (anti-Semitic commentary was rife in our sample), then moved to conspiracy theories about Jews controlling everything (also common in our sample), and finally to full-on Holocaust denial, the "fattest" and most difficult to swallow red pill. Many participants discussed how difficult mentally it could be to adopt ideas counterfactual to mainstream beliefs. As one Discord user explained, "That's like a lot of people. They've been brainwashed their whole lives to believe Hitler was evil, it's hard for them to accept that he was right."

Finally, some participants moved from the far-left to the far-right, as in this former Bernie Bro (a young male supporter of Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential bid), who detailed his experience with "red pills" on Reddit:

> used to be an anti-american socialist. inactive, but politically very anti-western. never pro-sharia by any means, but totally one of those, "but american atrocities and racism!" types.the first red pill came from hillary cheating my at-the-time beloved bernie, which made me start to pay more attention. the second was a video by sargon of akkad titled, "the assassination of donald trump."but the final nail in the coffin was milo yiannopolous, who showed me that what i always assumed was a bunch of stuffy old white guys in suits were in fact far more fun, accepting, and relevent. which brought me to the world of the_donald

Notably, many people in the Discord dataset described undergoing a political evolution from far-left to far-right as they cycled through niche political beliefs. We saw descriptions of people who moved from various forms of socialism to fascism, "Moaism" (Mao Zedong's form of Marxist–Leninism) to "minarchism" (a form of libertarianism), libertarian to "paleocon" (traditionalist Christian nationalism), or, as one Discord participant put it:

> Commie to SJW
> SJW to Progressive,
> Progressive to libtard
> libtard to Conservative
> Conservative to lolbert
> lolbert to Natsoc
> Natsoc to oldfash[8]

This Discord participant's recounting of their own political evolution highlights how processual redpilling functions in online communities. Such communities are mostly composed of young people debating the finer points of different belief systems, leading

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[8] "Lolbert" is a derogatory term for libertarian. Natsoc is National Socialism (Nazism), and oldfash is slang for an older fascist (similar to an "oldhead" in hip-hop culture). Thank you to Megan Squire for this insight.

individuals active on social media to affiliate with a series of increasingly right-wing, and eventually far-right, political ideologies.

Participants described different paths to adopting extremist viewpoints, but all are processes in which the individual begins with a slight interest or exposure to far-right points of view which becomes more serious over time. This process is often characterized by adopting more socially acceptable "gateway beliefs" such as anti-feminism, transphobia, Islamophobia, or anti-immigration points of view. However, we consider the "processual redpill" a more realistic understanding of how people adopt extremist beliefs than the "redpill as a moment of conversion" model, and it is more consistent with the extensive literature on political socialization (Gimpel et al., 2003; Sapiro, 2004).

Disinformation and The Redpill

Our second question asks, "What role does *disinformation* play in the adoption of extremist, far-right, and white supremacist beliefs?" In our data, the "redpill" is widely-used to link instantaneous conversion to single statements, statistics, or content like "news" articles—justifying the adoption of extremist beliefs as the rational result of "facts" or "research." This suggests that believing disinformation to be factually accurate—and evaluating disinformation as sufficient evidence for the adoption of extremist beliefs—is a crucial step in the process. Disinformation found in these groups ranges widely from YouTube videos to academic papers, memes, podcasts, and "copypastas" with no clear origin.[9] Regardless of genre, much of this disinformation relies on biologically essentialist ideas of race and gender to reinforce extremist ideas, often supported by charts, infographics, and other forms of evidence that "look" scientific. Throughout our corpus, the (primarily male) participants repeatedly describe themselves as highly intelligent and rational, whose adoption of hateful views is the result of significant research into the truth, contrasting themselves against "normies" who sheepishly swallow the pablum of mainstream media. This allows participants to claim a moral high ground, justifying adherence to extremist ideas through a veneer of expertise and scientific fact.

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[9] See Topinka, 2022 for an explanation of copypastas in the far-right context.

Redpills as Standalone "Facts"

The term "redpill" is frequently used to refer to standalone "facts." Gab, a micro-blogging site with a 300-character limit, was rife with examples:[10]

> red pill of the day: white people, on average, are the most compassionate and least racist of all racial demographics. i say this as a non-white.-only race to abolish slavery (africans and asians still do it)-white euros led civil rights movments-they shunned kkk#redpill #sharefreely

> one of the top ten red pill truths.female primates all want to mate with the strongest male in the herd, because females only get a few opportunities to pass on their dna. ergo, they want it paired with the strongest dna they can get.this is why traditional marriage became traditional.

Redpills as standalone facts emphasize the author's ability to convert others near-instantly to their worldview by sharing a single statement, statistic, or link. They lean on anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism, misogyny, or other taken-for-granted prejudices among their intended audience. So strong is the belief in the conversion power of redpills as standalone facts that one Gab user linked to a (now defunct) "handy little hate fact dispenser," a site where "every time you refresh - or click the…redpillme button - you get a fresh red pill." Labelling these as *hate* facts reveals the nearly universal prejudice intrinsic to redpills as standalone facts.

These redpills are not only factually inaccurate: positioning them *as* redpills does important rhetorical work. It suggests they are so convincing that they can convert people in an instant by presenting them with nigh-incontrovertible evidence. It positions hateful beliefs as factual (as one participant explained, "facts and truth is racist"). And, like much extremist rhetoric, they simplify an otherwise complex world, as one ex-QAnon Redditor described:

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[10] In December 2018, Gab changed from a Twitter-like interface with a 300-character limit to a Facebook-like interface with a 3000 character limit. Our data preceded this change.

Most people do not understand the vast complexities of international banking, global politics, and worldwide media. A person could spend years learning about just a single one of these subjects. It can be quite an ego boost if someone sat you down and in a few hours someone offered you a comprehensible overview that appeared to explain everything and wrapped it all up with a solution to the whole mess.

While this user eventually distanced themselves from redpill ideologies, their observation that such redpills provide relatively simplistic, straightforward explanations for complicated sociopolitical phenomena holds true in many instances across our dataset.

Repeating Standalone Facts

In contrast to the redpill-as-conversion model, many Discord participants described the need for constant repetition of evidence to convince others, as in this discussion from the CascadeFront Discord, a server for Pacific Northwest white nationalists:

Participant 1: For redpills i just send redpilled articles or threads to normies once in awhile, eventually theyll be like "fucking k****"
Participant 2: As well as the holohoax
Participant 3: Already has happened to my social circle

In this excerpt, participants describe how they redpill others through a gradual socialization process involving repeated exposure to disinformation as a series of redpills. Although our dataset lacks longitudinal information, many participants described their "redpill journey" as a process of consuming larger amounts of increasingly extreme information.

Books as Redpills

Redpilling narratives mention many causes—friends and family, world events, ideologies—as well as a diverse array of disinformation including videos, documentaries, and

news articles. However, the significance that *books* play in redpilling surprised us.[11] Books were the most frequently mentioned variable in redpilling narratives, above "friends," "family," or even "social media influencers." For example:

> south/confederate stuff gets to me. feel kinship, declare myself southerner. am a lot of things, too, though. part of my heart is there. am a historian as well. my "red pilling" came when i read "gone with the wind" when i was like 12 or 13 & realized civil war was different than taught in school (Gab)

> I was born in Germany and spent most of my life in America, and I started finding out about and understanding fascism a few months ago when a friend of mine recommended me to read Mussolini which I did despite having been told my entire life that he was a terrible person, and his writings are just very fascinating and relatable to me. That's sort of how I moved from the normal conservative right into fascism I guess. (Discord)

Books mentioned by participants were a mish-mash of anti-Semitic historical texts, far-right Republican books, discredited academic work, and fiction. A brief sample of such works includes *The Servile Mind* by Kenneth Minogue (2010); *Mein Kampf* (1925)*; Culture of Critique* by Kevin McDonalds (1994-1998)*; The Passing of The Great Race* by Madison Grant (1916)*;* Martin Luther's *On The Jews and Their Lies* (1543)*; Origin of Races* by Carleton S. Coon (1962)*; The International Jew* by Henry Ford (1920); Herrstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994)*;* Edward Bernay's *Propaganda* (1929)*; Suicide of a Superpower* by Pat Buchanan (2011); *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell (1934)*;* and *A Troublesome Inheritance* by Nicholas Wade (2014). These books are widely available as free PDFs, often included in organized libraries of redpills spread on social media. They are also a historical library of white supremacist thought, much of which hinges on long-discredited biological essentialism.[12]

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[11] The larger dataset for this project includes a full taxonomy of what individuals claim "redpilled" them, including friends and family, ideology, influencers, media, personal events and experiences, and world events. Our focus in this paper is disinformation and "redpills as facts," so we chose to analyze books as an unexpected form of disinformation.

[12] Of course, despite being discredited, books like *The Bell Curve* and *Gone With the Wind* still have plenty of high-profile apologists.

Redpilled communities consistently reinforced the importance of reading such books. One Discord server, for example, released a book club announcement stating "We meet every Monday at 8p Eastern to discuss the current book we are all reading. If you fall behind in reading, or haven't read at all, feel free to still join and we'll catch you up." Another Discord server had their own GoodReads book club; their first book was *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson. The book club leader explained, "it's a really interestging exploratin of the concepts of modern nationalism… it's a quick read. I've been through it 3x for various classes on Nationalism and Empire. So yea it is an important book and I'd like to drop it on you guys (and girls) and give you ammo in the fight against the left. turn their own books against them."

"Doing the reading" plays an especially integral role in Discord servers that engage in a vetting process for new members, where prospective participants must convince moderators they know enough of the group's "canon" to engage productively in conversation. Failing to illustrate this can elicit skepticism about potential members, as a BFFBlackFlagFront moderator demonstrated: "Ok, you need to start reading some books on fascism as you currently do not know enough to be properly vetted." This moderator then recommends where to begin: "Start off with Squire's Trial, you can find a free pdf of it in pinned messages...You have a long way to go but you have shown interest which is a good start."

Books also came up in conversations about how to redpill others. One Discord participant said, "well, the only thing i had to do was show my friend one excellent book, then he researched the truth about Hitler and others by himself and therefore began redpilling himself onwards." Participants read weighty texts and argued about their significance; they posted book reviews and solicited recommendations; they posted lengthy reading lists of "baby's first redpill books" and sent copies of books and supporting evidence to others. For instance, in a race realism Discord:

> User 1: @User 2 have u read tragedy and hope?
> User 1: [amazon link]
> User 1: u won't understand geopolitics and the western situiation wiuthout it
> User 2: No I haven't

User 1: @User 2 if you want, i can PM u a comprehensive lecture series on it. it'll save u reading over 1000 pages of history.

Although most people think of social media when referencing disinformation, our data demonstrate the significance of textual media as well. While we cannot say whether participants had actually read the books mentioned, the texts circulated throughout these communities as status symbols, allowing individuals to claim mastery over complex topics while linking their beliefs to a lengthy, documented history of white supremacist disinformation.

Disinformation as Factual, Logical, and Rational

The emphasis placed on intelligence, rationality, and "critical thinking" skills in redpilled communities helps to cement members' beliefs in the validity of extremist ideologies and claims. For example, one Discord moderator wrote:

We at In2TL thank you all for your participation, inviting friends and helping our server grow. As we grow, we need to remind everyone of our Code of Conduct. When presenting information as FACT, be prepared to provide the "Sauce" to back the FACT.[13] If you have a theory or opinion please state it as such, not as FACT. In the coming months, as people gravitate to our movement and possibly our server, they may be completely unaware of topics we have and will research. Keep this in mind when we discuss sensitive topics.

Participants often challenged each other on this point. One participant asked, "could you brief me, or give me a good, concise resource on your colonization point so I can use that argument and back it up?" In response to "I would like your best rebuttals to being told 'gender is a social construct' and 'gender is about expression,'" another Discord user provides a PDF of a paper by a professor of psychiatry and notes, "I have yet to read it very thoroughly, but it states that the 'x trapped in a y's body' thing has no basis in any scientific research."

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[13] "Sauce" is Internet slang for "source."

A post from theredpill subreddit illustrates that this can also extend to feelings of community superiority:

> many here at the red pill like, or at least would like, to believe in their own superiority. the application of critical thinking and rationality has shown so much of the world to us all. it makes us feel superior to those who have not seen, or refuse to see, this higher truth of our natures. critical thought has exposed and laid bare many ugly truths of our societies and of the people we interact with every day. however, that feeling of superiority may leave some thinking that there is nothing else to learn, or that there isn't more behind it, or that the thoughts of others who are different are wrong and stupid. this is simply blue-pill thinking at it's finest.

In this post, the user discourages other participants from allowing this to lull them into complacency. Nevertheless, the post's author seemingly believes that the community's "application of critical thinking and rationality" justifies this sense of superiority by exposing participants to "ugly truths" unseen by those outside the community.

Doing Your Own Research

The process of "doing the reading" often overlaps with an emphasis on intelligence, rationality, and critical thinking skills. A user from the redpillwomen subreddit illustrates:

> although trp [The Red Pill] and other male dating coaches advise against taking any females advice on dating, i am a perspective seeker and i always think for myself. i also cross reference and do research on the things i read. such as looking up mainstream opinions on similar dating topics and psychology videos and articles since there's a lot of that out there as well.

This user's ability to "think for [them]selves" and identity as a "perspective seeker" are intimately linked to the research process. Prompts to do one's own research often coincide

with the introduction of "mountains of evidence" or redpills-as-standalone-facts. This can be seen in a post on the DeepNews Discord:

> Wikileaks just dumped all of their files online. Everything from Hillary Clinton's emails, McCain's being guilty, Vegas shooting done by an FBI sniper, Steve Jobs HIV letter, PedoPodesta, Afghanistan, Syria, Iran, Bilderberg, CIA agents arrested for rape, WHO pandemic. Happy Digging! Here you go, please read and pass it on

In this post, the user lists several potentially interlinked (if, at first glance, highly distinct) conspiracy theories, prompting others to investigate each topic on WikiLeaks and determine their validity for themselves.

Going Down the Rabbit Hole

Going down the rabbit hole refers to internet-based research in which references found in one source lead to another, revealing fractal-esque worlds of exploration. Like the QAnon conspiracy, extremist communities resemble fan communities in their assemblage of "canon" and "evidence" (Marwick & Partin, 2022; Reinhard et al., 2022). A single Discord might include hundreds of links, multiple hour-long YouTube videos, and other media repositories, with the sheer amount of evidence introducing complexity. One MedLatinNationalistUnion Discord user posts several (now unavailable) Pastebin links, purporting that they definitively "prove" various prejudicial beliefs, including "race realism and IQ," "The great replacement [theory]," and "Diversity + Proximity = War." The same user links two collections of "infographs," ranging from crude image-based memes to legitimate-looking tables, all intended to justify hatred toward different social groups. Finally, they link to an archive of "over 2 terabytes of redpills" on /pol/, the "politically incorrect" discussion imageboard on 4chan. The /pol/ redpill archive is so large that users debate its utility as a redpilling device: while one user states "you really don't need this much stuff to redpill people with. Keep it simple, a few documentaries or short videos on each topic," another counters, "If someone needs a specific redpill, then they could just look in this gigantic library and they're more than likely going to find something." Indicating the sheer vastness of the archive, another user notes "there's so much here [they] don't even know where to begin." The presence of *mountains of*

evidence provides substantive proof for extremist views, regardless of the veracity of any one piece.

Discussion and Conclusion

In contrast to stereotypes of white supremacists as racist yokels, the participants in our dataset—overwhelmingly men—position themselves as intelligent, rational, scientific actors. To them, the adoption of extremist beliefs is the logical conclusion of scientifically evaluating evidence, doing their own research, or "going down the rabbit hole." Viewing their beliefs as not hateful, but *factual*, creates a justification for something that would be morally reprehensible to outsiders. Truth claims and moral claims thus stand side by side. This also reinforces the common belief that the media, universities, politicians, and shadowy powers-that-be are conspiring against white, Christian men by suppressing such factual evidence and replacing it with factually inaccurate but politically correct narratives. Framing even widely-discredited or otherwise shoddy evidence as objective, incontrovertible truth plays into historical valuations of whiteness and the masculine as logical and rational, lending such frames particular power when employed among white men.

Whether one considers redpilling a moment of conversion or a lengthy process, *evidence* is what changes a person from a "normie" to being "redpilled." It is through consuming redpills that the subject sees the hidden truth and wakes up to the reality of a world turned against them. However, by repeating the term "redpill," participants and critics alike position this evidence as so convincing that it can convert people instantly. The reality—that adopting extremist beliefs is a longer process of socialization imbricated with community ties and networks—is less dramatic, but offers more potential for intervention. Scholarly literature shedding light on this process, whether into the role of meaning-making and affect in radicalization, political socialization, or socialization into online communities, may be valuable when considering possible solutions to the uptake in extremist belief systems. Returning to the sociotechnical theory of media effects which considers *messaging, affordances,* and *audiences,* we find participants in extremist groups heavily consume messaging which argues white people are biologically superior; men are smarter and more fit to lead than women; white culture is superior and under threat from inferior groups; Muslims and immigrants are dangerous; and LGBTQ+ identities are a form of mental illness or, at worst,

harmful. As participants are repeatedly exposed to these "facts" and "evidence," alongside prejudice, racism, and misogyny expressed by community members, they learn to view them *as proof* of hateful beliefs. Given the subjectivity of participants as rational actors who highly value scientific reasoning (whether pre-existing or inculcated by the communities they belong to), such processual redpilling demonstrates the inextricable link between extremism and disinformation.

This has several implications. First, attending solely to disinformation spread on sites like Twitter or YouTube ignores how pervasive disinformation is across the Internet, particularly that which is decades or even centuries old but being rediscovered by motivated young racists. Second, academics or other knowledge-producers working in disciplines where their research can easily be misused have a public responsibility to recognize the potential for such interpretation and work assiduously to counter it. Finally, attempts to work against "online radicalization" must explicitly address the role of science and rationality in the process of taking on extremist beliefs and create counter-messaging that appeals to these values. Otherwise, we are ceding valuable ground.

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