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Book Review: Leidig, E. (2023). The Women of the Far Right: Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization.

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Abstract

This article reviews Eviane Leidig's "The Women of the Far Right: Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization."

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Review

During the heyday of the alt-right, the predominant media images of its participants were of men: violent and armed like the tiki-torch-bearers of the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville; buttoned up and well-groomed, trying to give the appearance of hard-hitting academics, confronting facts the rest of society ignores; or online trolls, nerd masculinity taken to the extreme. The alt-right considered misogyny (the "sex pill") to be an entry point into its political ideology: once someone had accepted biological differences and a hierarchy between men and women, it was easier to shift them towards acceptance of the idea of biological differences and hierarchy between races. Scholars recognized this appeal to men: that "sexism serves as the alt-right's gateway drug" (Romano, 2016; see also Kelly, 2017).

Eviane Leidig's *The Women of the Far Right: Social Media interaction and Online Radicalization* considers the inverse of this conception of a gender gateway, advancing a growing focus in the field on the women of the movement (Blee, 2002; Darby, 2020; Kelly, 2018; Mattheis, 2018, 2021; Stern, 2022), and their role in online radicalization. The book traces the role of women in the far right, especially their efforts to recruit new members and spread far-right ideology, and discusses the considerations that their participation requires for

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countering and preventing extremism and radicalization, particularly as spread online. As efforts to counter the spread of the far right have brought widespread deplatforming of many its prominent male influencers from social media platforms and blogs, women of the far right have emerged increasingly as the face of the movement, presenting the same ideology couched in softer language and imagery to avoid content regulations (Leidig, 2023, p. 163). Leidig's *The Women of the Far Right* illuminates the nature of the social media ecosystem that makes this possible.

The first chapter begins, appropriately, with definitions: here, of the alt-right versus the far right. There was considerable debate during the height of the alt-right's popularity as to whether the term simply served to rebrand and present extremist ideas as more palatable and acceptable (among others, Daniszewski, 2016; Futrell & Simi, 2017; Kelly, 2017; Mohajer, 2017; Stanley, 2019). Since then, the term has become useful to describe one particular manifestation of the far right: as Leidig defines it, "the dominant far-right political scene in North America approximately from 2016 to 2019" (Leidig, 2023, p. 23), distinct from previous far-right movements for its "emergence and evolution in parallel with technology – it was based almost entirely online" (p. 34). Many such texts begin with explainers of terminology: the far right, the radical right, right wing extremism, white power, white nationalism, white supremacy, fascist, neo-Nazi… which is not to say that beginning from such framings is not necessary. Leidig presents the concerns as well as the utility of the "alt-right" label, and uses it to understand the context out of which the women she studies emerged and gained influence, definitions that provide important clarity in particular as 'alt-right' continues to be used popularly, at times interchangeably with 'far right'.

Leidig proceeds with her sample selection and her own journey into these spaces on Instagram and YouTube, placed in parallel to the narratives presented by far-right women of their radicalization and path to extremist politics. Leidig frames these women's radicalization stories (their "red pill vlogs") through the context of influencer culture, highlighting not only their stories of disillusionment with feminism, isolation from networks of friends and family, sense of victimization, and discovery of community among the far right, but also their use of social media trends and language in order to recount these moments, borrowing from existing trends, framing red pilling as a "glow up" in a play on beauty-blogging posts (p. 50), couched in a video about meal preparation (p. 91) or the makeup tutorial (p. 178) . Leidig positions

these women first as influencers, applying Abidin's frameworks of "contrived authenticity" and "calibrated amateurism" (Leaver et al., 2020, p. 106) to understand their self-branding and presentation on mainstream social media platforms, targeting a wide audience. As influencers, they frame themselves as both aspirational and achievable (Abidin, 2016). This authenticity is itself a production, carefully and quantitatively assessed to see how each piece of content performs online, from style decisions to calculated sharing of personal information to their audiences (Hund & McGuigan, 2019, p. 28). Instagram offers not only this wide broadcasting, but the potential for private direct messages between influencers and followers, making it particularly useful for recruitment (Leidig, 2023, p. 173). Here she considers their audiences, noting that they are in some cases disproportionately made up of men. Far-right women are not only speaking to women about acceptance of their true feminine nature, but also to men, selling a fantasy of a traditional family and home life to attract men to the movement (pp. 53-56).

Returning to the alt-right's gender gateway, Leidig's chapters on "Femininity not Feminism" and "The Making of a Tradwife" show how these women reinforce 'traditional', biological understandings of a gender binary, "men as inherently masculine and women as inherently feminine" (p. 62). She provides an initial survey of "women-supported misogyny" and its intersection with the 'tradwife' (short for 'traditional wife') movement, which highlights the nuclear family and domestic life. Connecting to research from Darby (2020) and Mattheis (2022), she argues that it is hard to know where these communities diverge, as they share in promoting "ideals of femininity and masculinity that historically stem from white, European, upper-middle-class relations" (p. 98). This overlap is particularly insidious *because* it is so vague. She also highlights these influencers' spread into other digital trends: cottagecore, food blogging, natural living, and the "conspirituality" (Ward & Voas, 2011) around wellness narratives that formed the backbone of anti-vaccination movements and COVID-19 conspiracy.

She moves then into the monetization part of influencer culture. Leidig's framing of these far-right women as influencers is a particularly valuable contribution from *The Women of the Far Right*, illuminating how the entrepreneurial nature of social media influencing serves as a strategy for normalization of far-right ideology. These women sell image and ideology as well as lifestyle, and even specific products through corporate sponsorship:

normalizing the movement by finding a way for it be absorbed into consumerism (p. 130). In many cases, they also sell their own branded products, borrowing language from self-help and wellness to appeal and obscure, combining coded symbols and seemingly innocuous imagery to avoid recognition. Here, Leidig demonstrates how they reflect and employ broader trends of "female entrepreneurship in the digital age" (from Duffy and Pruchniewska, in Leidig 2023, p. 144) in order to support their political agenda. Where leftist or anti-capitalist movements tend to lament the co-optation and absorption into capitalist structures, these women take advantage of it, mainstreaming their ideology by making it available for mainstream consumption. Leidig also traces where these women move beyond the far right's metapolitical strategy into direct political engagement, from direct actions to speaking in parliaments, all of these framed and presented through their positions as influencers, providing a personal connection and accessible recounting of their experiences, as public figures and activists.

The Women of the Far Right provides important insights and reflections into the work of preventing and countering radicalization and extremism (P/CVE). She describes these women's versions of their paths to the far right, and the social aspects which push them into it, as well as help to bring them out. Given her focus on social media, Leidig surveys the "four D's of content moderation': *deplatforming*, *demonetization*, *deranking*, and *detection"*, borrowing from Robyn Caplan's understanding of content moderation, and also considers more direct but 'softer' methods of challenging and presenting counter-narratives (Leidig, 2023, p. 171). Here she draws from Megan Squire at the Southern Poverty Law Center and media scholar Richard Rogers to challenge the idea that deplatformed actors who migrate to smaller platforms that only reinforce their views grow more extreme, noting that without the audience and potential to draw attention through shock and outrage, their online behavior might even grow *less* toxic (p. 174). Leidig offers an essential reframing of the value of deplatforming: it prioritizes protection of victims and marginalized voices, a concern often left aside Silicon Valley's emphasis on protection of free speech (Marwick, 2017; Massanari, 2017). Moving through the different approaches, she shows how the far right chafes under each or adapts to find new strategies to reach viewers.

Leidig also considers technology-based approaches which challenge or counter far-right messaging, "programs that promote positive narratives through campaigns in order to

counter and challenge extremist propaganda" (pp. 188-189). She begins from the perhaps better-known start-up company Moonshot (formerly Moonshot CVE), which partners with Google's Jigsaw unit to design more technology-focused solutions such as identifying users who view extremist content online and redirecting them to different websites. It is difficult to measure the success of such approaches (pp. 190-1). Leidig is ultimately critical of the potential for technological solutions, including calls for building media and digital literacy, as they focus responsibility on the individual, whereas the enormity of the mis/disinformation infrastructure has become so huge that it should instead lie with tech corporations or governments to regulate and investigate (pp.192-3).

She is more optimistic about social solutions: what she calls "counterinfluencers", content creators who operate within the same cultural spaces online who can explain, challenge, and counter the narratives put forward by extremists. By taking advantage of the same platform dynamics and influencer culture that far-right women employ, counterinfluencers are able to reach potential viewers alongside the extremist content they are debunking, providing an immediate response through hijacking hashtags and avoiding automated content detection through some of the same strategies as employed by the far right (pp. 195-6). Leidig sees potential here, but as with other influencers depends on their ability to appear authentic to their audiences. Those who have scaled up their efforts through collaborations with government or larger organizations may be seen as less credible (p. 197). She also considers that pathways in and out are not shaped purely by ideology or technological capabilities, considering the varies social pressures and incentives that influence either. In the final chapter, she recounts Lauren Southern's departure from and return to the far right, quoting Journalist Jared Holt to note that "It can be a profitable decision to go to the far right" (p. 212).

Leidig's work highlights what is working and what is not in the most widely-used approaches to online P/CVE, with a specific focus on women. In particular, locating the site of extremism *within* influencer culture provides a deeper understanding of this space of radicalization, one often overlooked in content moderation strategies. These women reflect the far right's ability to adapt to these approaches, and to learn to circumvent and work within them. Leidig's exploration of this new manifestation of the far right online, then, offers space

to consider where these can be updated. Ultimately, she considers social ties and community influence to be the best ways to counter extremist ideologies.

The Women of the Far Right is valuable for its perspective on the far right, but also for Leidig's candidness in discussing dilemmas many researchers of extremism face, particularly early career scholars. She is clear and open about her ethical concerns, and those of the national review board and their considerations as to whether she needed to obtain consent from the women she studied (p. 11). She acknowledges safety concern for her own safety connected to such research, mentioning others who have been doxxed and harassed (pp. 11, 213-5). Leidig also reflects on her own susceptibility to this content, recognizing that even with her deep knowledge of far-right strategies and tactics for messaging, she can recognize the appeal and, to credit the skill with which these women portray authenticity, begin to sense a personal connection (p. 12). She also speaks to questions around publishing anything at all: "Does writing about these women, their world, play into their strategy of mainstream exposure? Can revealing their efforts lead to more potential supporters seeking out their content when they perhaps wouldn't have otherwise?" (p. 212). Having these conversations openly, acknowledging the doubts that I expect many face in this field, makes it easier for other research to reflect on these concerns in relation to their own work. Being able to read through other scholars' methodological and ethical choices will inform decisions other researchers make regarding what is appropriate, safe, or acceptable. Beyond Leidig's insights into far-right metapolitical approaches, she provides needed space for these considerations.

The Women of the Far Right offers many new and important contributions: a focus on Instagram and mainstream visibility, a focus on women, an understanding of the far right's adept manipulation of influencer culture. It also serves, to an extent, as a round-up of the 'usual suspects'. Leidig focuses on women who are already clearly identified as participants in the far right, those who have been at the center of much of the research thus far. What she begins to sketch out – and what remains for future research to fill in – are the spaces between these key figures: their followers, and the dozens if not hundreds of other influencers that share similarly ambiguous content and operate in much the same way as the women at the center of Leidig's research, but whose explicit politics are less well-known. Leidig provides a foundation for understanding how far-right women twist and exploit trends of digital culture to their own ends, a broader survey of their strategies at a moment where it seems that far-

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right culture has moved firmly into the mainstream of many western societies. Understanding their approaches to recruiting and spreading ideology provides the first step to countering them.

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