Heights Libraries
Opening Doors, Opening Minds

Unpacking Our History Article Packet

White Supremacy Part 8
Radicalization and Recruitment

December 14, 2023

6:30 – 8:00 PM

Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353

<u>Upcoming Unpacking Our History Programs</u>

January 11, 2024
Slavery's Legacy in Health and Medicine Part 1
Medicine in Colonial America and on the Plantation

February 8, 2024
Slavery's Legacy in Health and Medicine Part 1
Jim Crow and Civil Rights in Health Care

Second Thursday of each month hosted on Zoom
Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353

Please check out our 1619 Discussion Homepage
heightslibrary.org/services/1619-project

The Library's 1619 interviews are on Youtube
#1619projectdiscussion #heightslibrary

Unpacking 1619 Podcast
New episode every other Wednesday

Contact John Piche at jpiche@heightslibrary.org

Unpacking Our History Interviews

The New Online Radicals: The Third Generation of Online Radicalization
By Jacob Ware 4th October 2023 In Insights

When a 13-year-old boy was caught by Estonian police in early 2020 leading a major international terrorist organization, shockwaves rippled through the Western counterterrorism community. But it was merely the latest uncomfortable milestone in a long term trend of extremist material growing increasingly accessible online. "Accessing a world of hate online today is as easy as it was tuning into Saturday morning cartoons on television," Oren Segal of the Anti-Defamation League opined, offering a painful comparison illustrating how modern extremism has replaced more benign pastimes. The capture provided perhaps the most shocking—if not outright damning—evidence yet of the increasingly out-of-control impact of social media on the extremism and terrorism stage: individuals in their early teens were not just being recruited by neo-Nazis but were actively recruiting, and leading, their peers.

In his seminal The Diffusion of Military Power, the University of Pennsylvania's Michael C. Horowitz describes major military innovations (MMIs), defining them as "the introduction and spread of new means of generating military power." Social media has proved a near unprecedented MMI for extremists and terrorists, allowing them to reach new constituents and inspire violence from oceans away. But this development has not been uniform, nor has it been sudden; it has progressed, and it continues to progress, in successive generations, which—like variants of the coronavirus—seem to overtake and eventually dominate the previous strain. Understanding these generations and the transitions between them might carry important counterterrorism implications—not least by highlighting the critical need to predict the next generation, and its tools, and work to interdict it before it again inspires new violence.

This Insight summarizes a report recently published by the George Washington University's Program on Extremism (PoE), briefly examining the three generations of online radicalization before exploring the counterterrorism implications.

The Genesis of Online Radicalization

"Hate went online," in the words of Chip Berlet, in 1984, through multiple bulletin board systems created by pioneers of modern far-right extremism such as Louis Beam and Tom Metzger. That first generation of online radicalization was characterized by ambition and fits-and-starts but promised great potential for the world's underground plotters. Extremist groups and networks spread propaganda more broadly and reached new recruits, while training and command-and-control were now possible through virtual formats.

If the dawn of the first generation was heralded by the invention of the computer, the second generation of online radicalization was born in the Harvard dorm room where Mark Zuckerberg invented Facebook. The second generation, which emerged in the mid-2000s, was sustained on the massive, public-facing social media platforms—Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram—which grew into tech behemoths in a new, more connected world. Unlike bulletin board systems and early forums like Stormfront, which were more esoteric and therefore required specific interest and knowledge of how to access, the public-facing profile allowed radicals to share their extreme ideology with friends and family, while the centralized social marketplace brought together extremists across borders and oceans.

The Islamic State's roaring blitzkrieg across the Levant in the middle of the last decade provided clear evidence of social media's increasingly revolutionary impact on modern warfare. In the second generation, extremists congregated in echo chambers which intensified radicalization, while algorithmic radicalization sped up the process. Terrorist organizations grew less important, and more extremist ideologies turned to violence. Violence was increasingly defined by lone actors with little training, attacking soft targets using more rudimentary weaponry. The Third Generation

The Estonian teen, however, was firmly a product of the third generation of social media radicalization—young, radicalized on encrypted chatrooms, communicating with like-minded peers far away and himself radicalizing others, and inspired by an eclectic mix of extremist traditions, such as the blending in some cases of World War II-era national socialism with concerns over environmental degradation. This new generation is both an intensification and a departure from its predecessor; not only are organizations less important, so are ideologies. Not only are lone actors now central, but they are frequently their own propaganda arm, with extremists in some ideologies even sharing manifestos and livestreams that feed their ideologies further.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only accelerated those trends, supercharging a new brand of conspiracism that relies not on 'alternative facts' but on an absence of facts. Women and children play a greater role as part of 'mass radicalization', as does mental health and a range of other vulnerabilities. Almost all violence is now committed by lone actors, employing even more diffuse terrorist targeting, often aimed at accelerating collapse and exhibiting shortened 'flash-to-bang' timelines, often contributing to less effective attacks from less professional fighters.

The net result of the third generation's emergence is unpredictability: there is no telling who will launch the next terrorist attack; against whom; and where, how, and why. Accordingly, law enforcement and intelligence agencies are stretched, dealing not just with a widening array of extremist threats, but also an accelerating number of national security concerns writ large. The story of social media radicalization, then, is one of diffusion—from centralized to decentralized and from organized to chaotic.

Counterterrorism Efforts

The major question counterterrorism practitioners and law enforcement now need to answer is whether the third generation is a departure from its predecessors or an addition. In other words, are we facing fundamentally different extremists or more numerous extremists? Do previous generations of social media radicals still pose a terrorist threat, or is the danger to communities now defined mostly by this newer variant of extremism?

Counterterrorism scholars and practitioners will also be burdened with projecting the next developments on the horizon. There is a perennial problem in counterterrorism studies: typically, by the time we identify a trend and propose countermeasures, that trend has already largely subsided, replaced by a newer threat profile. The third generation proposed here may, indeed, already have been eclipsed by a fourth—defined by technologies that have not yet presented themselves in the public eye, or that are too novel to be truly appreciated. What comes next? What is the next MMI to bless extremists with new tools with which to target civilians? These questions are of critical importance to counterterrorism and our future ability to protect communities from extremist violence.

The analysis bears crucial implications for the tech companies on the frontlines of this new counterterrorism environment, precisely by revealing the importance of greater oversight of social media companies. Social media has allowed terrorists to circumvent government altogether, and the tech behemoths that host such platforms have not filled the counterterrorism vacuum. The private sector's inertia has now led to debates over the future of Section 230—which offers platforms immunity from legal responsibility over content on their sites—as well as two Supreme Court cases on the issue. These developments underscore an important reality: that tech companies have failed in their duty to keep their platforms safe for users, and must now be regulated with more aggression by governments and policymakers. Mass radicalization on social media companies needs to be stopped, and deterring new generations of extremists radicalized online will accordingly require a more active regulatory framework.

The Women of January 6th: A Gendered Analysis of the 21st Century American Far-Right
HILARY MATFESS and DEVORAH MARGOLIN || April 2022
Program on Extremism at George Washington University

History of Women's Participation in Far-Right Extremism in the United States

Modern far-right extremism in the United States is not a homogenous movement; it is composed of a range of different groups (themselves varying in structure and composition) with significant ideological differences. Today, within the far-right, there are relatively new movements like QAnon as well as long-standing organized racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan. There are also militia movements like the Oath Keepers, and more diffuse associations such as the Three-Percenters, antiimmigration activists, and misogynistic involuntary celibates (or "incels").

It is, of course, beyond the scope of this report to provide a detailed analysis of the gendered aspects of women's participation in each and every American far-right group. Rather, this report provides a brief history of women's involvement in far-right extremism in the late 20th and 21st Century. This brief historical review underscores that women's participation in the January 6th Capitol Siege is merely the latest entry in a long history of women's contributions to such movements in American history.

The Ideological Importance of Women in the Far-Right

Women have served important ideological and symbolic roles in modern far right movements. For example, the central nature of women's roles are implicit in the famous neo-Nazi slogan the "14 Words," popularized by extremist David Lane, which states, "We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children;" the importance of women to the movement is even more explicit in the less well known corollary, "Because the beauty of the White Aryan woman must not perish from the earth." Emblematic of women's roles as promoters and legitimizers of white supremacist and extremist ideology, Lane's wife was instrumental in the operation of the 14 Words Press, which published neo-Nazi and white-supremacist writings while Lane was in prison.

Fundamentally, many far-right extremist groups articulate a gender ideology that venerates and purports to protect white womanhood; as a result of this ideology, numerous groups advance separate,

complementary roles for men and women. The hyper-masculinity associated with far-right extremist groups implies a hyper-femininity that needs to be protected and venerated.18 As Cynthia Miller-Idriss notes,

> "White women are key to the domestic realms that helped sustain white supremacy, from birthing and raising white babies to fighting school integration, making attention to 'home and the spaces of everyday life, to care and community work, and to the role of white women in nurturing and producing the white nation,' a critical aspect of the relationship between space, place, and the far right."

For example, the Alternative-right, or Alt-Right, was a term coined in the late 2000s by white supremacists like Richard Spencer to soften their brand of hate and make it more palatable. It is a young, membership-less, big-tent, far-right ideological movement that advocates for a return to "traditional western civilization," often holds antiimmigration, racist, and anti-Semitic views, with origins in North America.20 Many of these groups came together for the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in August 2017, which was organized and headlined by individuals including white supremacists Jason Kessler, Richard Spencer, and Chris Cantwell, and which was attended by white supremacist groups such as Vanguard America, Identity Evropa, the Traditionalist Worker Party, and National Socialist Movement, among others. Some leaders encouraged women associated with their movements to stay home because they anticipated violent confrontations.21 On the day of the rally, white supremacist and rallygoer James Alex Fields drove his vehicle into a crowd of peaceful counter protestors, murdering one and injuring 35.

For the women associated with the Alt-Right movement and other far-right extremist groups, there is a push to reject modernity and embrace traditional values. 23 The activities of female members help to mainstream these ideas. As Eviane Leidig argues, "these women operate within an adjacent network seeking to cultivate a long-term agenda of social and cultural change, i.e., metapolitical change, not short-term gains at the ballot box. They're deeply embedded in helping to achieve a far-right utopia."24 Part of this utopian propaganda focuses on motherhood.

Women sympathetic to far-right extremist groups often express disdain for feminism and gender-egalitarianism. Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey note that "in an oxymoronic trend, this anti-feminist ideology is proving effective in the recruitment of women to farright causes. A number of women identifying with far-right groups highlight conflict with feminists and hostility towards conservatives as being driving causes for their radicalization."26 Because the appeal to women's identities as mothers can depoliticize women's actions (as they are merely acting on behalf of their voiceless, vulnerable children), it has been an especially effective and common rhetorical tool among far-right women in the United States. As numerous studies of the American far-right emphasize, the image of 'concerned mothers' has historically been effective advocates for the enforcement of segregation, the censoring of criticism of American history, and even for the establishment of a white ethnostate.27 This means that analysis of the activities of these groups cannot write off women's activities as inconsequential or apolitical -- the performance of domesticity in-line with radical far-right ideology is a political endeavor.

For many of these organizations, the very performance of far-right versions of domesticity and white womanhood are seen as furthering far-right causes. For example, during a standoff with the federal government, a leader in the Oath Keepers movement (a far-right anti-government group) recalled that they "were actually strategizing to put all the women up at the front," in order to produce media images of the federal government attacking women. Consider also the assertion of the Proud Boys (a violent far-right, chauvinist movement) that they "venerate the housewife," encourage white women to have

children with white men, and publicly condemn women who do not fulfill traditional gender roles. Similarly, the neo-Nazi National Alliance encourages women to further the movement by giving birth to white babies. Rhetorical appeals that emphasize women's vulnerability and need for protection and those which demand protection based on their relationships with men (as wives, daughters, etc.) are a part of this hyper-feminine project.

This has sometimes led to the veneration of women who have suffered violence at the hands of groups the far-right opposes. The events at Ruby Ridge in 1992 (a multi-day standoff involving federal law enforcement officials that was initially related to Randy Weaver's failure to appear in court regarding firearms charges) and Waco in 1993 (in which a firefight and multi-week siege involving federal law enforcement officials followed an attempt to execute a warrant to search the Branch Davidians' religious compound on suspicion of illegal weapon stockpiling) served as catalysts for these movements and became foundational narratives related to the dangers of "government overreach."[31] Notably, one of the people killed during the 11-day siege at Ruby Ridge was Vicki Weaver, Randy Weaver's wife -- who has since been portrayed as a martyr.[32] Furthermore, two pregnant women were among the victims of the violence at Waco.[33] Narratives around victimhood and martyrdom among the far-right extremists are gendered.

While many far-right ideologies venerate the 'right' type of women, actual relations with women in the organizations can be tense. For example, while the KKK venerated the idea of white womanhood, its actual relationship with the white women that supported it was strained, and in some cases contributed to vitriolic attacks on WKKK members, even by members of the Klan.[34] Conflict often emerges when women in the group attempt to participate in the same sorts of activities as male members or when they attempt to take on public roles. The competing visions of women-as-helpmates and women-as-members (a division that exists within and between groups) have continued into modern rightwing groups.

Women in the Far-Right in the 21st Century

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the variation among far-right extremist groups' objectives and organization, women's roles vary between and within these organizations. Women's participation in these movements in the 21st Century often lies on two ends of a spectrum: those that adhere to traditional gender roles where women operate behind the scenes in largely auxiliary roles, and those that defy or challenge those traditional gender roles to take on more public-facing or even violent participation. Even within the same manifestation of the far-right, such as militia movements, there can be multiple groups that adhere to different ideological drivers, and thus have different levels of female participation.

For example, after taking root in the KKK and Aryan Nations, the Christian Identity movement had become a core tenant of many white supremacist ideologies. Connected to the British-Israelite movement, the Christian Identity (CI) movement believes that white Anglo-Saxons and Germans are the true Israelites, and espouses racist and antisemitic rhetoric. Many of the militias that emerged in the 1990s were guided by not only white supremacist ideology, but also fundamentalist Christianity and even Christian Identity beliefs (or those that advocate for antisemitic and racist theology). Groups like "The Order" and "Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord" (CSA) closely intersected with Christian Identity. The CI movement holds women in subordinate and auxiliary roles; women are seen as "the helpmates of men and the nurturers of the next generation."[39] Modern technology has provided these movements with new platforms to spread their extremist ideology and recruit new members.[40]

While groups like Christian Identity peaked in the 1990s, the internet ensured that their influence is still widespread, especially among neofascist accelerationist groups.

Conversely, while many women in far-right militias play auxiliary roles, in other militias women participate on seemingly equal footing with male members. The role articulated for women in these groups is an interesting and valuable axis of differentiation between modern far-right militias. For example, while some militias may espouse CI ideology,42 other anti-government groups including some militias, sovereign citizens, and other conspiracy theorists, have incorporated women to greater extents.43 While members may hold misogynistic or white supremacist views, the aim of these groups is to push against the federal government, which they believe to be tyrannical and illegitimate.

Women have a long history of helping to mainstream far-right ideology. For instance, when the KKK re-emerged in the 1960s, women not only contributed to the day-to-day logistics of the group's operations but also helped rehabilitate the KKK's public image, helping to mainstream its ideology.44 White women who were invested in the prevailing racial hierarchy became integral spokespeople for the system, perpetuating it through both formal policies and informal racist practices.

The emergence and mainstreaming of the internet has provided women with even more opportunities to contribute to far-right extremist groups. As women have historically done for far-right extremism in the United States, online they play important roles in public-facing positions and recruitment efforts. Jennie King and Eisha Maharasingam-Shah note, "young women are seen to provide a more 'accessible' face for neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups, whose image is otherwise tainted by historic associations. This re-branding has been notably effective online, where articulate and attractive social media stars... draw in large followings and can facilitate the 'redpilling' of young, vulnerable followers."45 Far-right women have emerged as social media influencers, who use "gendered narratives in recruitment and radicalisation towards achieving community building and a sense of belonging in the far-right."46 Similarly, Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey argue, "Women are becoming increasingly important as broadcasters, dramatically amplifying messages across the spectrum of worldviews that comprise the international far-right, ranging from European cultural supremacists and anti-Muslim activists, to the United States alt-right, to more traditional neo-Nazi and Skinhead groups." Some far-right extremist groups have established online forums for women within their movement.

An example of this comes from the 'tradwife' (a portmanteau of 'traditional wife') movement, which gained prominence in the mid-2010s and has been bolstered by social media platforms.49 Tradwives and their advocates assert that women should reject modernity and embrace domesticity and homemaking. The movement has connections to the white supremacy movement. A well-known tradwife figurehead, Ayla Stewart, issued a "white baby challenge," in which she encouraged followers to counter declining birth rates among Caucasians.

Recently, many attribute QAnon's rise - and women's prominence within it - to social media. The widespread umbrella ideology argues that there exists a "cabal" or secret political faction or "deep state" conspiracy controlling world politics, international banking, and running a child trafficking ring, among other things.51 Some scholars of American far-right extremism note that this movement, relative to other far-right groups, has incorporated women in especially high-profile and violent roles.

QAnon's ideology appears more gender-inclusive than other far-right extremist groups, and women have played a significant role both in disseminating and creating QAnon propaganda.53 Marc-Andre Argentino has labeled this phenomenon "Pastel QAnon," in reference to the online female influencers,

many of whom began as lifestyle bloggers,54 present across multiple platforms who use a unique pastel aesthetic to soften and spread their messaging.55 Leveraging their womanhood, the group utilized the online space to spread the QAnon conspiracies, including hijacking the hashtag #SaveTheChildren, which not only helped recruit other women but also appealed to younger audiences.

Moreover, unlike many other far-right movements, the QAnon movement has seemingly successfully mainstreamed. In the 2020 election, two QAnon supporting candidates made it into office, both women.57 Furthermore, in the upcoming 2022 congressional elections, several candidates (and sitting representatives) support the movement, many of whom are women.58 Women's prominence in this movement may be a result of a number of factors, including the movement's outreach on digital platforms popular with women (such as Instagram), as well as the organization's misinformation-fueled campaign against child abuse and trafficking.59 The QAnon ideology appears more gender-inclusive than other right-wing extremist movements, and launders its extremist views through a public concern for children. The movement's focus on the need to protect children offers particular on-ramps for women, who have often justified their involvement in far-right extremist groups as a means of protecting their children.

Conversely, in some parts of the far-right, toxic masculinity drives gender relations. For example, while there were reportedly all-female groups of skinheads which engaged in racist violence, in many cases, these groups maintained a version of traditional gender roles that included the domination of women by men as part of a political project.60 Kathleen Blee argues, "many skinheads are violently masculinist, referring to women in their groups as 'oi toys' and taking pride in their ability to dominate their girlfriends and wives."61 In other groups, such as the Atomwaffen division, some women have reportedly undergone arms training.

Recently, as in previous manifestations of far-right extremism, there has also been contestation over women's autonomy and roles in specific organizations. For example, there was a well-publicized conflict between the Proud Boys and women who sought to form an associated "Proud Girls" movement.63 An account associated with the Proud Boys movement responded to the group by saying, "Want to support us? Get married, have babies, and take care of your family."64 In fulfillment of an ideology of women as complementary or auxiliary members whose connection to the group runs through their relationship with men, the Proud Boys established a dating site for its members; according to the ADL, "the page was advertised via the official Proud Boys Telegram channel, captioned on separate occasions with 'SEND NUDES' and 'SEND BOBS & VAGENE' -- ostensibly to elicit nude photographs. Women were also encouraged to support the Proud Boys by wearing a shirt from the group's official website, announcing, 'I would f*** the Proud Boys.'"65 Promiscuity or overt sexuality among women appears to be sanctioned only when it involves sexually gratifying a Proud Boy or bearing his children in furtherance of the white race. Such instances underscore that though far-right extremism largely abides by traditional gender norms, there are challenges to these ideologies. A review of several Gab, a social media network primarily used by those on the far-right, message boards highlights that there is a significant difference between how far-right men perceive far-right women and how these women perceive themselves.66 As Julia Ebner and Jacob Davey note, "Despite the increasingly prominent role of women, gender remains a heavily contested issue in the far-right space; for instance, female figureheads often have to negotiate their identity within a hyper-masculine ecosystem."

As explored throughout this section, women's participation in the far-right in the 21st Century is rooted in women's long history of involvement in the far-right in the United States. Since its inception, women have often faced contention over the types of roles they should play in far-right movements, which

often adhere to more traditional gender roles and binaries for men and women. Modern far-right extremism is no different; while the rise of the internet gave women a greater platform to spread their messaging, the same gendered tensions and disagreements continue to arise within these movements. When examining women's roles in the far-right, it is important to look at the goals of the sub-movements that have emerged. While some groups and ideologies are more gender inclusive and have incorporated women into more public-facing (and even overtly political or violent) roles, others have maintained more traditional gender binaries. However, despite these differences, the majority of these groups continue to emphasize women's roles as wives and mothers to help soften their message and mainstream their ideas.

Shutting down the right-wing rabbit hole is possible: First, follow the money

By AMANDA MARCOTTE   **SALON.COM**
June 30, 2023

"The man I loved wasn't there anymore — and instead this monster that had the most horrible thoughts about people was in its place."
When the woman I'll call Ann married her husband in 2002, he was "someone who couldn't care less about anything political at all." Over the years, he drifted into being a Republican, but it wasn't until 2017, after the election of Donald Trump, when she says "his radicalization and intro to conspiracy theory happened." Within the last few months, Ann told me, her husband began telling their children "how the people behind Monster Energy drink are obviously Satanists because they hid symbols on their can."

I met Ann on the Reddit forum QAnon Casualties, where family members and friends of QAnon believers and other far-right conspiracy theorists come to commiserate. Like several other members of the forum I contacted, she requested that Salon not publish her real name.

Ann hung in there for years, sticking with her husband through the far-right conspiracy theories and the flat-out weird ones. "He tried to convince me that the NFL was run exactly like the WWE in that it was entirely scripted," she told me. Eventually, with the help of a therapist, she came to the conclusion that "there is literally nothing I can say to bring him back."

That realization "has made things easier to handle," Ann says. Before that, "all I could think about was how badly I wanted to die," she continued. "I was scaring myself with how badly I just wanted out." With her therapist's aid, she says she is now planning an exit strategy from her marriage.
Ann's journey is one that untold numbers of people have endured in recent years: watching a loved one become radicalized through online disinformation. Once such people have disappeared down the proverbial "rabbit hole," it can sometimes be impossible to get them back. Preventing people from falling into the disinformation abyss in the first place is obviously crucial — and the good news is that prevention is possible. Experts already know a lot about both why and how people get radicalized, but the difficult part is interrupting the process by which vulnerable people are exposed to ever more vicious propaganda that lures them into the darkest caverns of social media.

One of the most promising avenues for prevention has emerged from a surprising place: Parents and schools who have made it a mission to battle social media addiction. They're using the same tools that proved so effective at curtailing a different and even deadlier public

health menace: cigarette smoking. Only this time around, instead of suing Philip Morris and other big tobacco companies, they're going after Meta, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube and Snapchat.
Another QAnon Casualties poster who goes by Tristan Penifel (also not his real name) told me that Ann's story is highly typical of visitors to the forum. People show up initially, he said, wondering how they can debunk the wild stories and outrageous claims they're hearing from a formerly normal loved one. Tristan says he and the other forum regulars gently try to steer the newbies away from that path. The old hands know that it's nearly impossible to argue people out of false beliefs they've picked up online, once those have become ingrained in their identity.

Tristan told me his father fell deep into the realm of right-wing conspiracy theory years ago, and became obsessed with the claim that Barack Obama had been born in Kenya. "I spent hours one evening debunking every single thing that he could find about the birth certificate being fake," Tristan explained in a Zoom interview. "By the end of all of that, he was like, OK, maybe the birth certificate is real." Preventing people from falling into the disinformation abyss in the first place is obviously crucial — and the good news is that experts say that's possible.

But Tristan's victory was short-lived. His father immediately pivoted to another conspiracy theory that claimed Obama "was handpicked by the banks to protect them after the 2008
financial crisis." Tristan's father had once been involved in Occupy Wall Street, but the allure of online conspiracy theories had pulled him far to the right.
Tristan went on to write about his experiences at Medium, arguing that "all of this is ultimately on the conspiracy theorist. They are the one who has some kind of emotional sickness driving them into these beliefs, and they are the one who can cure themselves. If they refuse to engage, no one else can save them."

None of this comes as a surprise to experts who research far-right groups and conspiracy theorists. What the members of QAnon Casualties see happening to their loved ones is much bigger and more systematic than a small subset of the population adopting some kooky notions. Instead, they have become radicalized, and recent history tells us that while most people who believe outlandish conspiracy theories will not commit violent acts, the danger is very real.

Even when they don't commit violence, "people who get involved in these movements destroy their lives," David Neiwert, author of "The Age of Insurrection: The Radical Right's Assault on American Democracy," told me in a recent interview. "It draws people into the abyss. It ruins their family relationships, ruins their relationships in the community."

Early in the Trump administration, activists like Christian Picciolini, who has worked to help deradicalize white nationalists, attracted a flurry of media attention. Most experts believe, however, that convincing someone who has dug themselves deep down the rabbit hole is a difficult and unpredictable process. Egos over freedom: Proud Boys trial proof MAGA will pay any price to avoid admitting they were wrong "Deradicalization is even more personal and idiosyncratic than radicalization," Brian Hughes, an American University professor who co-founded the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab (PERIL), told me. "Deradicalization is something that you do after the worst has already happened,"

he continued, meaning "after a person has really made a grave social and even moral mistake, or sometimes committed an act of violence."

Even at that point, it frequently doesn't stick. Even as defendants from the Jan. 6 Capitol attack face prison sentences, there's a common thread to many of their stories: They're totally not sorry. Jacob Chansley, the infamous "QAnon shaman," got some relatively sympathetic media coverage after his arrest, when his defense attorney portrayed him as a regretful dupe. Now that he's out of jail, however, Chansley has made clear that he's still a member of the QAnon faithful.

Even as defendants from the Jan. 6 Capitol attack face prison sentences, there's a common threat to many of their stories: They're totally not sorry.

Chansley told the Arizona Mirror he was "not a big fan" of his now-former lawyer, "after I found out all the things he was saying in the media without my consent. He said that I felt duped by Trump. I never said that. I never asked him to say that. He said that I denounced Q and the QAnon community. I never said that."

Lisa Sugiura of the University of Portsmouth encountered a similar phenomenon, she said, while researching her book "The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women." While some men she interviewed identified as former rather than present-tense incels, Sugiura reports that many still share the same misogynistic views found on the "involuntary celibate" forums they have supposedly left behind.

"They will still say, 'Oh, well, you know, women still get away with a 'pussy pass,'" or that "women shouldn't be so picky," she said. "It's very depressing. You think, well, is there a way out?"
"There is no getting him back. He is very much dead to me," said George Fincher, who lives in Birmingham, England, and agreed to use his real name. He was talking about his stepfather, a former Royal Marine who has gone deep down the online QAnon rabbit hole. Fincher said he suspects that his stepfather is battling unresolved trauma, and in the process has alienated his family.

"He doesn't speak to his kids. He's met his grandchild once," Fincher explained. "Probably, in his mind, the only thing that he has going for him is this [QAnon] idolatry. Because he certainly doesn't have a family anymore."

This comports with what researchers know about people who become radicalized. PERIL uses a "supply and demand" model to explain the process. Hughes laid out this theory in a legal brief filed in a lawsuit after Steven Carrillo, an Air Force sergeant affiliated with the extremely online Boogaloo movement, shot three law enforcement officers in California, killing one of them.

"On one hand, extremist recruiters and propagandists offer a supply of ideological material, imagery, entertainment, and opportunities to organize with like-minded extremists," Hughes wrote. "On the other hand, individuals pursue radicalization because it meets certain social and psychological needs — this is the demand side of radicalization."

As Hughes told Salon in an interview, "In the days before the internet, a person would have to be very lucky — or very unlucky, depending on how you want to look at it — to encounter extremist propaganda or an extremist recruiter." Neo-Nazis used to trawl hardcore punk clubs looking for vulnerable kids; white nationalists would look for prospects target at gun shows. "What's changed nowadays with the internet," he said, "is that you can't avoid radicalizing material. Propaganda is everywhere."

Evidence that the internet has accelerated radicalization is also everywhere, as anyone who has watched Facebook friends melt down in real time can attest. Researchers at the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found in 2022 that "nearly one in five Americans (16%) are QAnon believers." Among Republicans, that proportion rose to 25%.

Of course Steve Bannon and Alex Jones love RFK Jr. — he's a great weapon for their war on reality Beyond the damage done to individuals, families and the body politic, there is compelling evidence that online radicalization has fueled a rapid rise in extremist violence. The Government Accountability Office reported a nearly fourfold rise in domestic terrorism cases from 2013 to 2021. In many of the most dramatic examples, a common factor is online radicalization. Consider "incel killer" Elliot Rodger in California, white supremacist mass murderer Dylann Roof in South Carolina and the mass shootings in a Pittsburgh synagogue, an El Paso Walmart and a Buffalo supermarket. These dreadful cases are alarmingly similar: A young man radicalized by online propaganda decided to act on his bigoted delusions with real-world violence.

A Facebook whistleblower opens the door

In the fall of 2021, former Facebook employee Frances Haugen began to release reams of internal company documents exposing all manner of embarrassing secrets: Facebook had knowingly let disinformation flourish on its platform, had turned a blind eye to hate speech and overt incitements to violence, and deliberately targeted underage users, despite internal research showing that social media overuse could be dangerous to minors.

"There were conflicts of interest between what was good for the public and what was good for Facebook," Haugen told "60 Minutes." "Facebook, over and over again, chose to optimize for its own interests, like making more money."

In many of the most dramatic examples of domestic terrorism in the past decade, there's a common factor: The perpetrators were young men who became radicalized online.

The Facebook document dump was a big scandal, at least at first. But media attention faded rapidly, especially as Elon Musk flirted with buying Twitter and then finally did so, shifting the locus of concern over social media disinformation away from Facebook and toward the "bird site." But Haugen's whistleblowing clearly had an impact on government and the legal system in terms of one crucial issue: The mental health impacts of social media algorithms on teenagers and children.

Over the past year and a half, there have been multiple congressional hearings about the health risks of social media for underage users. A Centers for Disease Control report on the teen mental health crisis included concerns about the impacts of social media. In May, Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy released an advisory noting "growing evidence that social media use is associated with harm to young people's mental health." While admitting that the phenomenon is complex and that social media access can be beneficial for some kids in some circumstances, he argued that unregulated, excessive use was a likely contributing factor to the "national youth mental health crisis."

What mental health risks are we talking about here? This remains a fraught topic, where research is continuing. What's discussed most often are issues like low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, insomnia and attention disorders. But there is also evidence that the potentially addictive qualities of social media — although the term "addictive" remains

controversial — contribute to right-wing radicalization. So one way of framing the problem, and a potential solution, is to argue that if social media companies can be forced to curtail the business strategies that lead users down right-wing rabbit holes and negatively affect mental health, it would be much more difficult for far-right movements to recruit online.

Legislative approaches to regulating social media are still in their infancy, and are likely to encounter strong resistance. But there's one promising channel that could move a lot faster: Litigation. A growing number of lawsuits filed by school districts, parents and young people themselves are claiming that social media companies deliberately design their products to be addictive — or at least to draw in users for longer periods of time and maximize "engagement" — which is contributing to the youth mental health crisis.

"The end goal is to make young people engage with and stay on the platforms as long as possible, because that means they can sell more advertising," lawyers for the Cabrillo Unified School District in Northern California argue in a district court lawsuit filed in May. "The YouTube, TikTok, Snap and Meta companies have learned that this is best accomplished by catering an endless flow of the lowest common denominator of content that is most provocative and toxic that they can get away with." Anne Murphy, one of the plaintiff's lead attorneys, told Salon: "There's been good research done that shows that social media's effect on the brain is very similar to the effects that you have with gambling or even taking recreational drugs."

"What we are looking at is the 'public nuisance' legal theory, which allows government entities to hold companies liable for unique damages caused as a result of a company's conduct," said Ron Repak, a lawyer who is representing Pittsburgh-area schools in a similar lawsuit. The lawyers who spoke to Salon pointed to precedent-setting lawsuits of years past, based on claims that companies had deliberately addicted their customers to harmful products in search of greater profitability.

The most famous of these were the consumer protection cases against tobacco companies that began in the 1990s, which were so successful the federal government joined in. In 1999, the Department of Justice won a racketeering suit against Philip Morris and other tobacco companies, successfully claiming those huge corporations had systematically defrauded the public by lying about the health risks of smoking. Now the school districts suing social media companies are making similar claims, also from a position of governmental authority. Similar lawsuits are being filed by parents who allege direct damages to their children.

Lawyers in these cases emphasize that their goal is not strictly financial. They also hope that a measure of real accountability can force social media companies to rethink how they do business.
The lawyers who spoke to Salon emphasized that their goal is not strictly financial, although their claims are partly based on the taxpayer money lost because schools must spend more on mental health and security. They also hope that a measure of real accountability can force social media companies to rethink how they do business. Ira Weiss, who represents a different Pittsburgh-area school district, said he believes that these kinds of lawsuits — against the tobacco giants, Big Pharma and vape manufacturers, for instance — can also help educate the public and political leaders.

During the discovery process, Weiss explained, internal company documents will likely be obtained, and "there will be depositions taken where all this marketing and technology strategy will become known." (One recent model that made headlines was the defamation suit against Fox News by Dominion Voting

Systems, which exposed a great deal of embarrassing material about the right-wing cable network's internal operations.)

"The customer's always right": New Fox News lawsuit explains why the GOP is captured by conspiracies Theories about exactly how social media addicts people or lures them in deeper, especially younger people, are still being developed. It's fair to say the mechanism is not exactly understood, as was also true of nicotine addiction for many years. But there can be little doubt that social media companies program their algorithms to make scrolling seem almost irresistible. As Haugen put it, Facebook's internal research made clear that its products were "designed to be engaging," and also that "that can lead to very high rates of what we call 'problematic use.'" As an article for NBC's "Today" site explains it, "That's how an innocent search for 'healthy recipes' on Instagram might lead a teenager to eating disorder content instead."

That's what is meant by the ubiquitous term "rabbit hole": Users may begin with relatively innocuous content, but to keep them "engaged," social media algorithms keep serving up ever more extreme — and, yes, more engaging — content that can plant dark thoughts and provoke deep insecurities. One lawsuit filed by California parents cites Pew research showing that, for some users, "the more they use social media, the more they are drawn down the rabbit hole into further use, making it increasingly difficult for them to stop."

"Addicted" to QAnon, misogyny and the Boogaloo

The same rabbit-hole phenomenon that can draw social media users deeper into the world of eating disorders or suicidal ideation also appears to be a factor in online radicalization. Lisa Sugiura notes that many of the men she interviewed while researching the "incel" community were first drawn into that world through unrelated or apolitical online material, before the algorithm turned their heads toward darker stuff. One interviewee, she said, had done a "simple Google search" about male pattern baldness and eventually ended up on "incel forums, which were heavily dissecting and debating whether being bald is an incel trait."

That man became an incel "very much through the algorithm," Sugiura said, and through online conversations with people who "showed him a different way to view the world."

"Pathologies like eating disorders and suicidality exist on a continuum with radicalization," said Brian Hughes, the American University scholar. "In a lot of cases, they're co-morbid. Depression and radicalization are commonly seen together." Just as online merchants hawking dangerous diet products exploit young women's insecurities, he added, the world of far-right influencers displays "an obsession with an idealized masculine physique, which often leads to steroid abuse."

The most famous example of that phenomenon is Andrew Tate, a British influencer currently being held by Romanian authorities on charges of rape and human trafficking. Tate's alleged victims say he choked them until they passed out, beat them with a belt and threatened them with a gun. A former kickboxer, Tate has made a fortune by showing off his muscular physique and expensive toys, gizmos and gear to attract a massive online following of young men, promising that he can turn them into "alpha males." Tate has become so popular with boys and young men in the English-speaking world that educators are organizing and sharing resources in an effort to combat his influence.

"There's been a huge increase in rape jokes that the boys are making," a seventh-grade teacher in Hawaii told Education Week.

"Pathologies like eating disorders and suicidality exist on a continuum with radicalization," said Brian Hughes of American University. "Depression and radicalization are commonly seen together." Conspiracy theories and right-wing propaganda often hook people, as Tate does, by appealing to anxiety and insecurity, especially regarding hot-button issues like race, gender and status. In his legal brief in the case of Steven Carrillo, Hughes explained that the murderer "was gratified by the feelings of anger and indignation" from far-right videos he saw on Facebook and "was rewarded with more extreme, more angering content." (Carrillo pleaded guilty to murder and eight other felony charges last year, and is serving a life sentence without parole.)

"Facebook algorithms would encourage Carrillo to join a Facebook group called '/K/alifornia Kommando,'" Hughes wrote. Once there, "his deterioration increased at a terrific speed. He fully embraced the new identity of Boogaloo revolutionary."

Jason Van Tatenhove understands how that process works. A former member of the Oath Keepers, he offered dramatic testimony before the House Jan. 6 committee last year, explaining how leaders convinced their followers to join the insurrection on Trump's behalf. In his book "The Perils of Extremism: How I Left the Oath Keepers and Why We Should Be Concerned about a Future Civil War," Van Tatenhove details how he first got sucked into the group, and what it took for him to get out. "There's kind of a formula to what we were doing," said Van Tatenhove, who was hired to do communications work by Oath Keepers leader Stewart Rhodes, who was recently convicted of seditious conspiracy and various other charges, and sentenced to 18 years in prison. "We were always watching the news aggregates. We would set up Google alerts on certain keywords," in order to tailor recruitment content to what potential prospects were seeking out, especially on social media.

Oath Keepers leader found guilty: Will DOJ see this as a roadmap for Trump's trial? "What were the issues that really got people outraged and angry? Because that's the low hanging fruit," Van Tatenhove added. "We were looking for that outrage and that anger, because it seems to short-circuit our critical thinking centers."

That's exactly the kind of content that Facebook's algorithms have favored, according to Frances Haugen. "When you give more distribution to content that can get reactions," she said in a recent MSNBC interview, "you end up rewarding more extreme content. Because the shortest path to 'like' is anger."

Van Tatenhove says he is personally in recovery from drug addiction and, during our conversation, compared the allure of conspiracy theories to that of heroin. "While heroin feels great, it ruins your life," he said. "While conspiracy theories feel great and we get all those chemical releases — much like shooting heroin — it's damaging to our country and it's damaging to our democracy." He suggested that the U.S. needs an analogue to "methadone" for our conspiracy-theory addiction.

What is to be done?

There's clearly no magic-bullet solution to this problem, but the growing number of lawsuits by parents and schools could be the beginning of one. None of these plaintiffs seek a cold- turkey approach to social media, which would neither be possible nor desirable. As Murthy told the "Offline" podcast, it's

clear that many people "find community" on social media they might not find elsewhere, and that was doubly true during the pandemic. Social media, he added, can be especially beneficial for those "from a historically marginalized group where it's difficult to find people who may be going through similar experiences," such as LGBTQ youth.

"Conspiracy theories feel great and we get all those chemical releases, much like shooting heroin," said Jason Van Tatenhove. But "it's damaging to our country and it's damaging to our democracy."
As the complaint in the California parents lawsuit argues, the issue is not the existence of social media but the companies' reliance on an "algorithmically-generated, endless feed to keep users scrolling in an induced 'flow state'; 'intermittent variable rewards' that manipulate dopamine delivery to intensify use; 'trophies' to reward extreme usage" and other features that keep people overstimulated and unable or unwilling to log off.

The desired outcome here is simple: Perhaps the financial threats from these lawsuits will induce social media companies to make their products less addictive. Haugen has repeatedly argued that the path forward will require some form of government regulation. But the two approaches aren't separate but intertwined, the lawyers who spoke to Salon emphasized. They believe their lawsuits can generate public attention and information that will help shape both future regulation and the public will to enact it.

The most promising legislative effort is a bipartisan bill introduced by Sen. Brian Schatz, D- Hawaii, and co-sponsored by another liberal Democrat, Chris Murphy of Connecticut, and two conservative Republicans, Katie Britt of Alabama and Tom Cotton of Arkansas. The Protecting Kids on Social Media Act, like a similar state law in Utah, would bar kids under 13 from starting social media accounts and require parental consent for older teenagers. That is almost certainly unenforceable but, more intriguingly, the bill also takes aim at online algorithms, barring companies from using them to drive content to minors, although it would remain legal to use them on adults.

"While kids are suffering, social media companies are profiting," Schatz said in a statement. "Our bill will help us stop the growing social media health crisis among kids by setting a minimum age and preventing companies from using algorithms to automatically feed them addictive content based on their personal information." Of course, as the families of QAnon believers and the victims of right-wing extremist violence can attest, it's not just kids who are going down dangerous online rabbit holes. Schatz conceded as much in a Wired interview, saying that "it's bad enough that it's happening to all of us adults," but that "the least we can do is protect our kids."

Regulating social media may be cast as an attack on the First Amendment, but Sen. Brian Schatz argues that there's "no free speech right to be jammed with an algorithm."
The fate of that bill is uncertain, and there's considerable resistance in both parties to pursue direct federal regulation of social media, which would surely be cast by the social media industry and some civil liberties advocates as an attack on First Amendment rights. Schatz has argued, however, that there is "no free speech right to be jammed with an algorithm." Restricting the use of algorithms wouldn't impact anyone's constitutional right to express their opinions on social media. It would simply prevent the companies from shoving the most incendiary content at the most vulnerable users.

These questions of free speech and social media algorithms are tricky, and the legal and legislative arguments are in their early stages. When the Supreme Court was confronted earlier this year with a

case arguing that social media companies should be liable for algorithmic promotion of pro-terrorist content, the justices seemed grateful to punt the entire issue.

Legal experts hope that the consumer protection argument driving this new wave of social media lawsuits will create a framework for addressing this issue that sidesteps First Amendment concerns. The recent Supreme Court case looked at "whether a company can be held accountable for specific content," attorney Anne Murphy said. "We're looking at it much more holistically," by considering whether the algorithm should exist in its current form at all, considering the demonstrable harm it does to children.

The core idea here is to shift the focus from individual speech, which everyone agrees is protected by the Constitution, to the larger question of regulating the social media business model to mitigate its effects on public health. If the legal groundwork can be laid in these cases on the principle that children and teenagers should be protected from predatory business practices and deliberately harmful products, that could open the door to a larger regulatory structure that makes the internet safer for everyone.

This entire discussion is still in its infancy, and more needs to be learned about the way social media affects mental health. As mentioned above, there's considerable debate over whether the "addiction" model is a fair or accurate way to describe what happens when people get sucked deep into online rabbit-hole communities that encourage destructive behavior or ideologies. As the lawyers who spoke to Salon almost universally expressed, they hope this litigation can help illuminate some of these issues and drive more resources toward the necessary research.

Still, the family members of right-wing conspiracy believers have little doubt that social media had a profoundly debilitating effect on their loved ones, in many cases people who were vulnerable to the algorithm-driven pressure to stay online. Some people who dive down the rabbit hole may be struggling with long-term trauma or undiagnosed mental illness. Many are extremely lonely. In some cases, they have pre-existing prejudices and are eager to have their bigoted views validated by disinformation.

Whatever the root causes may be, social media platforms are profiting handsomely off people who are slowly losing their minds to the reality-distortion field of their feeds. No one suggests these lawsuits can solve the problem by themselves, but they could mark the beginning of a major public reckoning with the harms of social media that leads, eventually, to real answers.