The Weatherproof Process: The Education System's Role in Preventing Alt-Right Radicalism

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In response to contemporary questions about the appropriate response to a rise in alt-right ideas amongst young people, this article argues that the education system has a responsibility to counter the factors which make the alt-right appealing to young people in order to prevent radicalism. Primarily, the alt-right gains traction through a falsified sense of political and intellectual credibility, its ability to evade political responsibility due to a societal tendency to dismiss extremism which does not fit the idea of a 'foreign other' and their use of dark humour and irony to reduce social empathy between its members and those minority groups which it opposes, allowing a sense of distance between the groups which makes violence and hate more probable. Through schemes which promote social empathy, a refreshed idea about what classifies as an 'extremist', ensuring young people have access to accurate and unbiased information and taking a firmer approach towards bigoted behaviour in schools, the education system has both an opportunity, and a duty, to instil young people with the empathy and information required to make them far less likely to be radicalised by alt-right ideology.

INTRODUCTION

The alt-right (alternative-right) is a form of far-right extremism which emerged in the mid-2010s, existing as an umbrella term for a predominantly online community that rejects typical modern standards of racial diversity and inclusion, gender equality and LGBT rights in favour of a modernised version of traditional values consisting of patriarchal gender roles and strong advocacy for racial segregation (Wendling 2018, p. 4). There is a belief that multiculturalism and political correctness are enforced to vilify, oppress and eventually eliminate the white race and that men are being driven from their 'rightful' place as the dominant sex by a feminist agenda. I argue that the increased popularity of the alt-right should be counteracted through educational means due to the increased vulnerability of young people to alt-right radicalism through falsified intellectual support of the movement, a narrow societal definition of extremism and the alt-right's use of satire to reduce empathy towards minority groups. Specifically, a remodelled education scheme which places focus on specific behaviours and knowledge would be able to reduce the appeal of the alt-right to young people. It is noteworthy that education cannot prevent the very existence of the alt-right, due to its ability to thrive in an online space, but can work to make its content far less appealing or convincing to students.

Primarily, it is necessary to establish a qualification for my argument that education has a vital role in preventing extremism: while the role of the education system is enormously important in preventing the radicalisation of young people, the very nature of the alt-right as a predominately online phenomenon means that the education system should aim to prevent students from being radicalised rather than prevent the radical content from existing. The existence of the alt-right as a body is an issue which is simply out of the hands of educational means in the short term; thus, the aim of my suggested educational measures is not to stamp out the community all together, for that would be impossible, but instead lessen the appeal of its ideology—to 'weatherproof' children to its effects.

My first argument claims that falsified intellectual backing gives the movement a sense of credibility, which plays into the biases of its followers and potential new members. Schools can counter such misinformation about other social groups through integrated social learning, ensuring all students receive factual education about social groups other than their own to prevent ideas about others from deriving from rumours or stereotypes. Here my argument will draw on examples from alt-right activist Nick Fuentes and Bates' research on the effects of students' exposure to social issues on the susceptibility to alt-right content.

Second, I investigate the societal normalisation of 'casual' racism and misogyny, which result in acts of violence from the alt-right community being viewed as isolated, instead of symptomatic of a wider radicalism issue. As a result, the alt-right has a level of social immunity to the results of the violence which occurs in its community. I acknowledge the failures of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)'s 'Don't Be a Puppet' scheme as a potential counterargument to the idea that education should be used to prevent extremism. However, I clarify that the fixed public notion of extremism as a 'foreign other' makes it an ineffective scheme. Alternatively, 'The Good Lad Initiative' displays a more effective form of educational activity which aims to have open discussions about masculinity and radical misogyny amongst young people. Furthermore, changing the sole definition of extremism from that which is foreign would help identify discriminatory behaviour as extreme rather than normalised.

Lastly, the alt-right gains credibility through its ability to clothe its ideology as dark humour, allowing the communities message to be consumed more lightly and easily by new members, making radicalisation easier while going undetected by social media's filtration systems. In order to combat the use of dark humour to radicalise, as seen in the case of the Christchurch shooting, education which instils social empathy can be developed to reduce the social distance required to make extreme content about the abuse of minorities humorous. As a result, the education system cannot prevent extremism from existing. However, it can affect students' perspectives concerning such extremism to

make it less appealing, thus preventing radicalism.

The Role of Education: The Weatherproof Approach

The primary barrier regarding the role of education in preventing alt-right extremism is that the matter is complicated by the fact that the root of the alt-right exists outside the reach of a formalised education system. This does not prevent a degree of responsibility resting on the education system; because the alt-right exists predominantly online, the group most vulnerable to conversion is typically those who access the online space most—young people (Petrosyan 2023). Nevertheless, one must comprehend the extent to which the online space harbours the alt-right to understand that the largest responsible party for attacking the roots of the issue is the tech industry and decrease its potency by equipping young people with the knowledge, empathy and critical thinking skills which decreases the appeal of the content when they come to interact with them.

The online space has a specific, unique appeal to the alt-right. There is a lack of accountability due to lower enforcement of hate speech laws, meaning content which would be policed in real life can thrive. Anonymity allows higher numbers of followers due to reduced social repercussions of endorsing extreme views. Finally, an international reach can connect individuals globally from an easily accessible platform. A lack of social accountability is the most prominent benefit for members of the alt-right online: Wendling argues convincingly that sites like 4chan 'takes, to put it mildly, a very libertarian view on free speech' (Wendling 2018, p. 52). To make his case, Wendling points out that 'officially on the site, moderators will remove … racism … but 4chan is a site where … a "n*gger hate thread" doesn't qualify as racism' (Wendling 2018, p. 52). Sites may have some laws and regulations that dictate what is and is not allowed online, but they are often implemented to a minimal extent due to the sheer size and amount of content that breaks such codes. That being said, some evident violations of online laws often go unchecked. This means that the hate thread mentioned can thrive and grow without the limitations or legal policing which would occur in real life. As a result, the online space acts as a hotspot for the alt-right due to the lack of accountability provided by anonymous posting and lax regulations. One can see, then, that the online space harbours the alt-right in a manner vastly out of the reach of the educational system. They cannot regulate 4chan; they cannot ban offensive users or even stop their own students from accessing such content, whether on purpose or by accident. As a result, one should not expect education to prevent extremism by locating and counteracting active members but instead focus on educating students on current social issues and instilling empathy, making alt-right content unattractive and thus less likely to succeed in radicalisation. This is what I refer to as a 'weatherproof' approach: the education system cannot prevent the 'storm' which is the alt-right from existing—that is out of their hands—but they can take actions which will make young people aware of the dangers of the alt-right and equip them with the empathy and knowledge they require for such content to lose its charisma. I argue that education settings can do this via three main ways: the building of social empathy through diversified learning and curriculums, the providing of unbiased information regarding social topics with the encouragement of open conversation around them, and the installation of stricter school rules regarding bigotry in order to represent racism, sexism and homophobia as serious issues.

False Intellectual Credibility

False intellectual credibility is a dominant element of the alt-right's ideological appeal and thus is a suitable target for the education system to focus on. Public endorsement of the alt-right by those with perceived intellectual credibility normalises ideas which would otherwise be viewed as radical, thus giving credit to alt-right ideology and pushing it into the realms of social acceptability, as opposed to extremity. This is dangerous because it can legitimise views detrimental to minority groups and give political credibility to extremist ideology. Nick Fuentes, a 24-year-old alt-right activist, is a key example of the alt-right pushing into acceptable mainstream politics through intellectual and popular endorsement. His rallies attracted the support of former congressman Steve King and Arizona state senator Wendy Rogers, showing that the ideology of the alt-right, as presented by Fuentes, who has promoted a 'white Christian nation' and compared interracial relationships to bestiality, has successfully begun to creep its way into social acceptability due to endorsement by political actors who have a level of perceived credibility (Southern Poverty Law Centre (SPLC) n.d. b). Fuentes openly displayed his desire to shift the alt-right into the window of political acceptability: 'If we can drag the furthest part of the right further to the right, and we can drag the centre further to the right, and we can drag the left further to the right … then we're winning' (Hayden 2021). This emerging trend of mainstream politicians rubbing shoulders with members of the alt-right, and the subsequent movement of the ideology into the central sphere of political acceptability, increase the perceived legitimacy of their movement, making white supremacy and sexism no longer fringe views but ones endorsed—or deemed insignificant enough to be looked past—by major political forces. Within a classroom space, issues arise when young people feel that the political opinions that Fuentes promotes are legitimate and justified opinions to hold within the political space. The guise of intellectual credibility promotes him from a rambling extremist to an individual with sincere political values, which US senators endorse, thus making his content far more legitimate in the eyes of young people who do not have the political knowledge to contextualise his work as extreme.

Educational Response: Countering Misinformation

In response, education systems should promote the integration of political and social groups among students so that they are well-informed about other social groups. Students should be encouraged to critically analyse a broad political spectrum of views, preventing the alt-right from being viewed as the whole truth and contextualising it within a broader spectrum of politics. Misinformation about 'the other' is a prominent part of what makes the alt-right effective. Fuentes' claims that white people are being put at a disadvantage due to 'PC' culture makes his ideology appealing to a white

audience searching for a reason for their feelings of political and social dissatisfaction, even though 24.3% of Native Americans and 19.5% of Black Americans live below the poverty line, compared to 8.2% of whites in the US (Statista Research Department 2022). His support from seemingly credible political figures from mainstream politics increases the perceived validity of his agenda, even though statistics counter them. False propaganda means that racialised or gendered issues can be distorted to promote the alt-right agenda, easily done online in which confirmation bias (the psychological phenomenon in which one will favour or seek out information confirming their beliefs) often prevents such content from being properly vetted. The best way this can be countered within education is through the provision of alternative, factual information and the promotion of critical thinking so that when the alt-right presents its ideology as intellectually credible or even as factual, students feel equipped enough to dispute and assess claims made by the alt-right about minority groups with their information. Specifically, there should be a focus on members of one social group being educated on other groups: for example, a white woman will likely have some knowledge of the struggles of womanhood due to her lived experiences and thus is less likely to be radicalised by misogynistic content in comparison to a man. However, because she is not educated with the same knowledge on race, she is more likely to engage with racially extreme content with a less critical mindset due to a lack of foundational information on the subject.

Bates makes a strong argument that the majority of students who engaged in misogynistic behaviour, linking into areas of the online alt-right, had never been exposed to any content about the subjects beforehand; a lack of information meant that they were not equipped with any prior knowledge to make them think critically about the information they were presented with online. A subject, Alex, 'had a markedly different perspective from his friends' because 'his mum had already talked to him about feminism and inequality … when he encountered the same online propaganda, it didn't have the same sort of impact' (Bates 2021). Here we see that a young man equipped with just basic information about women's rights from a few conversations was less likely to be impacted by online extremism. From Bates' research, I propose that the curriculum needs to diversify content so that it is not only minority groups who receive information about minority issues; for example, classes and talks which promote women's rights within schools should not be held as an optional extra which is promoted amongst female students, but instead integrated into the essential curriculum so all students, regardless of gender, are taught about feminist issues from a non-biased and factual source. Of course, some arguments would state that this is a heavy-handed approach; many activists have claimed that enforcing a diversified curriculum is a form of propaganda in and of itself. In particular, the alt-right scene points eagerly at the sight of schools enforcing such rules as evidence of a liberal agenda aiming to brainwash young people into being politically correct, oppressing the freedom of speech rules we hold valuable. I understand the concern for freedom of expression, but the nuances of schemes such as this are of major importance in this context. Classes on minority issues should not be set up as lectures or forceful spaces in which any child who expresses a rogue opinion is scolded—instead, they should be structured to provide young people with arenas and opportunities to discuss opinions on sensitive topics in a controlled, safe space. Furthermore, the main aim of this change would be to make students aware and provide information on gendered and racial issues: it would be about ensuring that a child's first experience with the term 'feminism' is in a space which is safe to ask questions, and provides a range of accurate information for students to engage with, as opposed to it being through an alt-right post which tells young men that 'feminism is cancer'. Diversifying the education system is not about enforcing an opinion but providing students with context to the content they will encounter online so that they can see it as radical, as opposed to normalised. This ensures that students are equipped with information about social groups other than their own, meaning that when they are presented with extreme content, they have the skills and knowledge to engage with it critically rather than take it as factual or make assumptions about other social groups based on rumour or stereotype. By instilling effective curriculum changes which educate all students on issues which do not necessarily affect them personally, students are equipped with enough information that their knowledge of social others is not only formed by the internet.

Lack of Recognition as a Violent Ideology

Education can further protect young people from radicalisation by ensuring that they recognise the severity of alt-right content and understand the implications it has as an ideological community, as opposed to just the odd individual. The alt-right protects its integrity due to the public dismissal of its acts of violence and hate as acts of a 'lone wolf' rather than acts resulting from wider movement. As a result, the movement enjoys a reduced responsibility for the violence which occurs because of its ideology in ways other terror groups do not.

In 2014, 22-year-old Elliot Rodger killed his two flatmates, another friend and then drove to the Alpha Phi sorority house of University of California, Santa Barbara, where he shot three other women, killing two. From that followed a shooting spree in which he killed one and injured 14 more before finally turning the gun on himself. The manifesto he left—'My Twisted World'—was a 107,000-word declaration of his anger towards the people, but mostly the women he was surrounded with, who he felt treated him unfairly. His underlying ideology surrounded the fact that he was being robbed of sex by attractive women who viewed him as an inferior man and thus refused him the sexual pleasure he felt entitled to. Rodger felt that his physical appearance as a 'short, bad-at-sports, shy, weird, friendless kid' meant that women would never see value in him and thus needed to be punished. His manifesto was steeped in racist and misogynistic hate, comments including 'if this ugly black filth (referring to a black acquaintance) was able to have sex with a blonde white girl… while I've had to suffer virginity all my life, then this just proves how ridiculous the female gender is' (quoted in Wendling 2018, p. 61).

Srinivasan's analysis of the event emphasises the

reaction of the wider 'incel' community as a telling example of the extent to which the alt-right is steeped in the complicity of its most violent members. 'Incel' is short for 'involuntarily celibate' and was originally a term coined by a woman for both men and women who struggled romantically or sexually; however, it has now emerged into a community primarily comprised of men who harbour extreme misogynist views and blame a social hierarchy of selfish women only ever picking 'alpha men' for their lack of sexual luck. They blamed women for Rodger's actions; Srinivasan summarised their sentiments well in that 'had one of those "wicked bitches" just fucked Elliot Rodger he wouldn't have had to kill anyone' (Srinivasan 2021, p. 75). Srinivasan's commentary makes a convincing point about how Roger's actions were not only seen as excusable but actively justifiable and a cause for celebration to many community members. Many incels hail him as a 'prince' of the movement for his killings (Edwards 2018), endorsing his actions as righteous and a symptom of a desperate young man acting out due to being deprived of sex by women (Wendling 2018, p. 60).

This event is just one of multiple attacks and assaults committed as a result of a broader trend of far-right violence, including the killing of Heather Heyer at the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally and the 2019 Christchurch mosque shooting. On these occasions, events are rarely treated as acts of terror and are more commonly viewed as the work of a lone individual, often one who is viewed as being mentally ill rather than spiteful. Following the killings, California sheriff Bill Brown responded to a question about what can be done to prevent similar crimes in the future: he cited the difficulty surrounding arms laws and the fact that 'many suspects in mass murder incidents suffer from severe mental illness that is untreated or undertreated, yet in this instance the subject was receiving treatment' (Woolf 2015). There is no mention here of the incel ideology, the violent misogyny and racism in his manifesto, nor the community which spurred him on and hailed him as 'the supreme gentleman' following his killings (Srinivasan 2021, p. 112). As Srinivasan indicates, by the incel community, Rodger was seen as a lone, desperate young man whose actions resulted from being deprived of something owed to him: it was a cry for help from a sick young man whose world did him wrong. I argue from this that this sentiment somewhat transcends just the incel community, and the depiction of Rodger as a troubled young man extends to the wider coverage of the event. While coverage of the killings did not go so far as to justify him in any way, there is a sense of isolation in the sheriff's comments: the notion that it was the act of a singular, mentally ill young man, as opposed to a symptom of a more comprehensive ideology. While some perpetrators are likely to have experienced mental health problems, this does not detract from the fact that these events are linked closely to the violent and dehumanising rhetoric of the alt-right, which devalues the lives of women in the case as mentioned above, which the sheriff's comments do not touch on. The manifesto left behind by Rodger reeks of essential elements of alt-right culture; it consists of dark attempts at humour, a sense of victimhood, and the notion that they are taking 'revenge' on a group that the alt-right ideology believes is not only inferior to them but is actively trying to remove them from existence.

The activity of the alt-right is not simply the odd loner committing random acts of hate and violence. It has, in the cases shown, fatal implications for the minorities which it demonises. Thus, the acts of violence should be assessed in relation to the alt-right movement rather than be seen as isolated acts of violence, in order to recognise the links between the violence committed and ideology.

Educational Response: Reimagining the 'Foreign Other'

The main reason for the dismissal of violence committed by the alt-right as randomised and isolated is that the perpetrators do not fit the notion of an 'extremist', which is widely held as 'foreign'. Both the education system and wider government plans must move on from this fixated image of a terrorist as a distinctly foreign threat if the alt-right is to be held responsible for the political hate and violence which has been committed as a result of their ideology. There are strong arguments that the government's educational approaches towards counter-extremism are too centred on the notion of the 'foreign other' to be applied effectively to the alt-right, seeing as the alt-right consists largely of modernised forms of traditional white nationalism (SPLC n.d. a). I argue that the current anti-extremism laws fall short of being efficient with the alt-right because racist extremism, which aims to preserve an imagined 'authentic' national identity, cannot be counteracted by measures which focus on preserving national identity by targeting those construed as a foreign other. If one took the 'Don't Be a Puppet' scheme (see later) as an example of an educational response to extremism, then one would be rightly suspicious of its efficacy. The scheme was massively criticised, and one cannot deny that it spotlighted what issues can arise with using education to counter extremism. However, I argue the scheme itself was ineffective, not the use of education to address radicalism. While it was a poor use of education, the use of education itself can have a positive impact on reducing radicalism if done correctly—a manner which accounts for multiple forms and manifestations of extremism. The alt-right is steeped in a paradoxical sense of futurism and traditionalism—it relies on a thriving online space to root itself communally, while clinging to ideas that counter the egalitarian standards foundational to modern politics. This is, in fact, not what makes it unique—Islamic extremism shares this futuristic traditionalism in many ways. The difference, however, is that the notion of the 'outsider' is no longer applicable: members of the alt-right are typically young, white men who do not fit into the public imagining of an extremist. In many cases, members pride themselves on being 'real Americans', claiming that the country has fallen from grace due to modernity. They cannot be analysed through the same frame of the foreign threat as Islamic extremism so often is and are often harder to identify due to this lack of apparent cultural otherness.

One could argue that education can negatively affect young people's attitudes towards extremism, evidenced by the American 'Don't Be a Puppet' scheme. The current American anti-violent-extremism educational programme is heavily centred on Islam, failing in its profiling of Muslim students and lacking applicability to far-right extremism, which functions differently and thus requires an alternative approach. In 2016, the

FBI released a website to educate schoolchildren on the dangers of violent extremism. 'Don't Be a Puppet' consisted of a game in which students could navigate scenarios, quizzes and activities aimed at teaching teenagers 'how to recognize violent extremist messaging and become more resistant to self-radicalization and possible recruitment' (FBI 2016). The intent behind the project was sensible: it attempts to ensure that extremist messages are recognised as extreme, as opposed to mundane and make students less susceptible to radicalisation. However, it is a clear example of narrowing focused project that received mass criticism for profiling Islamic students as potential terrorists. In an open letter sent to the FBI requesting the shutdown of the site, criticisms focused on the website's encouragement of individuals to 'contact someone you trust if someone you know is … traveling to places that sound suspicious' (American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) et al. 2016). A place which 'sounds suspicious' is a problematic term: the underlying meaning here is, in reality, a place which sounds *foreign*. A holiday to central Europe is likely not to be viewed as 'suspicious', even though, as pointed out by the open letter, it hosts various far-right extremist parties, but a trip to the Middle East is far more likely to raise concerns as a 'suspicious' place. This unfairly targets Muslim and Middle Eastern students, displaying a huge blind spot for the scheme in terms of any form of extremism which is not connected to a 'suspicious' sounding location. The scheme is so focused on this idea of the vicious outsider, of the foreign other, that it completely discounts the idea that extremism might be grown and produced domestically. If taken in isolation, the 'Don't Be a Puppet' scheme would make a strong argument against using education to counter extremism in young people. However, I argue that this example is not so much evidence for flaws in an educational approach as a narrow-minded one. The previously mentioned criticisms are perfectly justified but result from a cultural focus on the foreign other as the image of a terrorist, which means that those who do not fit into that image often slip through the net. Instead of developing awareness skills, students are encouraged to profile 'foreign sounding' places; this would be of little use when the majority of radicalism amongst the alt-right takes place online, within the nation's borders. The scheme has an outdated and racialised idea of extremism, but that does not mean it could not be edited to have more effective content. For this scheme to apply better to more alt-right forms of extremism, it must move on from this idea of a racialised, foreign threat as the poster of extremism, particularly when such cultural villainization is, in fact, in line with much of far-right ideology.

Educational Response: Denormalisation of Hate

To counter the fact that alt-right ideology is not typically recognised as authentic extremism, education can work to contextualise the bigotry of such a group to ensure it is treated seriously and with consequences. The maintenance of social expectations which reframe intolerant behaviour as serious means that attitudes which link to or could be taken advantage of by alt-right ideology are reduced. Opposite the failures of the 'Don't Be a Puppet' scheme sits the successes of Beyond Equality, an educational group who deliver talks to schools, universities and sports teams on masculinity. Their schemes, like 'The Good Lad' initiative, are great examples of pastoral interventions in educational settings which focus on ideas of masculinity and challenges the normalisation of 'lad culture'. The project aims to 'prevent gender-based violence and create communities which are safe for everyone' (Beyond Equality n.d.), focusing on examining gender roles and what it means to be 'manly'. Schemes like this are key for undoing the normalisation of sexism within education spaces, which goes on to produce more confident young men who feel secure and informed enough that the victimhood and sexist environment of extremism seems far less appealing. Bates' (2021) research into sexism within schools again points out a correlation between schools which had opened discussions about sexism and prescribed gender roles and a decrease in sexist behaviour. She explains that in schools which had conversations about sexism, the students recognised its implications and that it was unacceptable. On the other hand, in schools where sexism was normalised and went unchecked, she 'watched boys jeering at female teachers then snapping to attention when male staff walk in' (Bates 2021, p. 265). Here we see that in schools which create a clear social boundary which states that sexism is not tolerated and social issues surrounding gender were discussed, there was a healthier environment with regards to gender. On the other hand, schools which dismissed such behaviour as 'laddish' produced a culture in which sexism, racism and homophobia were commonplace and often went without punishment. As a result, sexism becomes normalised within that space, the views deemed permissible, which then validate bigotry on a wider level—including that of the alt-right. If a schoolchild is not told that sexist or racist behaviour is wrong, they are unlikely to meet extreme content with the same criticism as one who understands the implications of such bigotry. When sexist or racist behaviour is normalised or excused, the boundary is blurred outside the educational setting online. The intolerance promoted by the alt-right is then not viewed with the severity it should be because students are not only desensitised to such levels of bigotry, but their sexist or racist attitudes are politically validated and thus strengthened. In order to contextualise the racism and sexism of the alt-right as extreme and negative, one must contextualise sexism and racism within educational settings as extreme, negative and serious. This is achieved by working towards a school culture that does not tolerate such attitudes and has open conversations about the implications of strict gender roles (as seen in the 'Good Lad' initiative) and the classification of bigotry not as simple 'laddish behaviour'.

Dark Humour and Irony

It is impossible to understate the prevalence of meme culture for the alt-right and the subsequential ease with which young people can encounter its content. The word meme is defined as 'an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by internet users, often with slight variations' (Oxford English Dictionary 2022). By no means are all memes a link to the alt-right—they are a diverse and ubiquitous cultural phenomenon to which most young people have access to and enjoy. However, this is the primary reason for its danger as a radicalisation

tool. For the alt-right movement, memes act as a way to convey ideology amongst the community in a humorous manner, enabling a sense of satire, which for potential new or less extreme members, makes them more digestible. It also means they can claim they are simply partaking in 'dark humour' as opposed to bigotry, making their content harder to police for social media platforms. It is noteworthy that dark humour is not always a bad thing; it is used by many as a way of making light of difficult situations, particularly ones which affect them personally. However, dark humour and satire are taken advantage of by the alt-right in order to reduce levels of accountability. If one is constantly walking the line between humorous and authentic content, it is easy to mask authentic commentary on race and gender as 'just a joke' instead of it being viewed sincerely and judged as such.

In 2019, over 50 people were killed in a mass shooting of two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. The gunman, Brenton Tarrant, targeted the mosques during Friday prayers, when they were busiest, hoping to inflict 'as many fatalities as possible' (BBC 2020). He live-streamed the massacre on Twitter, so his followers could watch the murders happen in real-time. The footage of the Christchurch shooting was quickly gripped by the meme culture of the alt-right, as users edited the footage to make it look like a classical shooting game, equipped with a kill count and ammo supply in the corners of the screen. The video was spread amongst individuals who were not even necessarily members of the alt-right, many of them everyday schoolchildren who swapped the video in group chats. There is a heavy sense of derealisation to this act; it is not an approval of the shooting for all members of the alt-right, but it distances the individual from the severity of his act, thus further dehumanising the victims and adding to the lack of empathy often shown. Members of the alt-right responded to this content in two ways; some considered it an example of dark humour, a satirical, but not necessarily endorsing, edit of the livestream video. Many of these were not promoting the act but exist as members on the outskirts of the alt-right community, possessing enough levels of dehumanisation of minority groups to bypass its severity enough to find humour in an animated 'kill count' being crudely pasted over a real-world massacre. However, for other members, the video was an opportunity to show authentic endorsement of his act by spreading it amongst friends in celebration. In August that same year, another gunman who had hailed Tarrant as a 'saint' online launched a failed attack at a mosque in Norway (Dearden 2019). The glorification of the act, whether in jest or sincerity, has a detrimental effect on the victims and other members of the minority groups targeted here; newer members learn to dehumanise Muslims through the spreading of the video in jest, and more radical members use the same content to hail the gunman as inspirational, going on to commit copy-cat cases.

Meme culture and dark humour mean that the alt-right can normalise cultural othering and reframe, or even glorify, the severity of its ideology. Irony further reduces the responsibility the movement has for its claims, as individuals can make hateful or misleading commentary which, if held accountable for, they can claim was 'ironic'. Contorted forms of dark humour, as seen in the Christchurch shooting, act as a foundational sense of 'othering' and instils a lack of empathy, making an individual more susceptible to extreme ideologies while simultaneously relieving the movement of the responsibility of their views. To return to Fuentes, he commented that 'irony is so important for giving a lot of cover and plausible deniability for our views', referring to comments he made denying the Holocaust (Dreisbach 2021). By taking the Christchurch shooting footage and Fuentes' Holocaust denial as examples, a Schrödinger's cat effect is produced: the content is both meant seriously and as a joke until a user receives it. If the user is far enough into the alt-right frame, it will contain some genuine and inspirational points about race; if they are newer to the scene, it is simply humorous by absurdity, which begins the foundational detachment process. Bates' moving sentiment rings true when she argues that the beginnings of alt-right radicalism are rooted in the casualisation of abuse under the guise of humour because 'it can't really be hating women if everyone is laughing about it online' (2021, p. 273); or in this case, it cannot really be racial hatred if everyone is laughing about it online. Even though an individual may not fully engage with the politics of the sincere side of the alt-right when faced with memes joking about opening fire on a mosque, there is still a distinct lack of empathy and 'othering' which is formed by humour being related to the abuse of minorities.

EDUCATIONAL RESPONSE: BUILDING EMPATHY AND REDUCING HATE

Education schemes must focus on building empathy amongst students to respond to this use of humour to radicalise and encourage dehumanisation. A key aspect of the alt-right's radicalisation process is building of an 'us vs. them' narrative. This typically stems from the movement's populist links, the notion that followers of the movement are the 'real' or 'original' members of a society and that those who lie outside of that social group are threats to the peace of the original society, or at fault for whatever may be going wrong within it. Empathy is significantly reduced in this process of detachment from social groups, from which comes a heightened probability for violence due to the dehumanisation and villainisation of a particular group. Davies' commentary on research by the Violence Prevention Network on politically radicalised prisoners and staff throughout intervention processes reached the critical conclusion that 'there is no change in behaviour without the capacity for empathy' (Davies 2018). In order to counteract this detachment and restore a sense of socialised empathy, the education system can instil learning values within students, which break down this notion of 'us vs. them' through extracurricular schemes and curriculum changes.

A good example of this is the Swedish 'Tolerance Project', created with a particular interest in neo-Nazi and far-right extremism. The 'Tolerance Project' recognised that intolerance and social othering could not be changed without instilling information and empathy. Unlike the FBI's 'Don't be a Puppet' scheme, the Tolerance Project focussed on long-term education and a sense of open conversation surrounding social issues in order to encourage students 'to express their ideas, even the controversial ones' through 'giving the students the historical and philosophical tools to ask

themselves the right questions' (The Segerstedt Institute 2019). The project is closely tied into the curriculum and traditionally ends with a trip to the Holocaust memorials in Poland, aiming to develop a sense of empathy and understanding of violence against minority groups. I argue that a similar line of thinking could encourage the same level of empathy to make the alt-right less attractive in the student body, acting as a preventative rather than a reactive measure. I propose a version of the 'Tolerance Project' adapted to address the growing numbers of alt-right radicalism amongst young people, where a curriculum was formed to instil empathetic values and valuable information in students who else would not learn about important social issues. However, the 'Tolerance Project' targeted those deemed vulnerable to, or already involved in, neo-Nazi ideologies. As opposed to this aspect, I argue that the scheme should target *all* students. Targeting students who are 'vulnerable', or cornering those engaged in content should be seen as a last resort rather than a preventative measure; in the proposed alt-right version of the project, schemes should be applied to the entire student body for any student with access to the internet (95% of US teenagers have access to a smartphone, and 89% said they were online 'almost constantly'; Bates 2021, p. 268) has access to such content, and is likely to encounter it either online or amongst peers. Similar to the focus on the Holocaust helping prevent neo-Nazi numbers from rising in Sweden, informed discussions on issues such as female genital mutilation, child marriage and abortion access would build empathy and prevent misogynistic attitudes which dismiss women's concerns. This sort of education scheme is not to shock or scare students, but to give a sense of realism and severity to the issues

they discuss and encourage sensitivity and empathy to social groups other than ours. Bigoted extremism is challenged by confronting attitudes with information and knowledge, instilling empathy into students, and preventing them from dehumanising other social groups.

Ultimately, education is a valuable preventative tool in regard to alt-right extremism, not only because the strong presence of the alt-right online means that young people are the most at risk of being radicalised, but because this is an ever-growing movement which is gaining political traction and has been behind multiple acts of violent terror. Thus, on a communal level, efforts must be made to prevent radicalisation. One must recognise the fact that many current government schemes are too far steeped in the notion of the cultural other to be applied well, and thus education schemes similar to that seen in the 'Good Lad' initiative and the 'Tolerance Project' can be employed to promote empathy, counter misinformation and decasualise bigoted behaviour in schools. Education cannot stem the very existence of the alt-right, for the group is too steeped in the online space, but education should seek a 'weatherproofing' approach: a focus on reducing the 'us vs. them' narrative in which the alt-right is steeped, providing information on other social groups to allow a better level of critical engagement with such content, and creating firm boundaries through recognising racism and sexism as wrong, rather than humorous or unimportant. Achieving these aims can make a strong counterbalance to the momentum of the movement by reducing its appeal and credibility.

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