Online Social Media as Context, community and learning environment for far-right lone actor terrorism

Mattias Wahlström

Dept. of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden

E-mail: mattias.wahlstrom@gu.se

The last decade has witnessed a large number of high-profile lone actor terrorist attacks, a large share with far-right ideological motives. A notable pattern found among many of these lies in the perpetrators' online activities. Among recent attacks in Germany, both the attacker in Halle in October 2019 and the attacker in Hanau in February 2020 joined the small crowd of attackers who published their political ideas in online manifestos, along with the prior Utøya and Christchurch terrorists. Conversely, prior academic studies have indicated that several lone acting terrorists have themselves been inspired to their deeds through online media.[1] This was likely the case with at least the perpetrator in Halle. In fact, the embeddedness of some purportedly "lone wolf" terrorists in far-right online environments has been brought up as an example of why this commonly used label is in fact misleading.[2] "Lone wolfs" are often not completely "lone", but have various types of connections to political groups and milieus, currently or in the past. Such connections – sometimes mediated online – are clearly important for understanding the individual process towards committing acts of political violence, typically referred to as radicalization.

As the title of this article indicates, my aim here is to discuss how online environments may contribute to acts of lone actor terrorism, starting from a broader discussion of social media and right-wing political violence. In this connection, I will also argue for the importance of approaching the

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[1] E.g., Gabriel Weimann, "Lone Wolves in Cyberspace," *Journal of Terrorism Research* 3 (2012); Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Stefan Malthaner and Lasse Lindekilde, "Analyzing Pathways of Lone-Actor Radicalization: A Relational Approach," in *Constructions of Terrorism: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Research Policy and Society*, ed. M Stohl, S Englund, and R Burchill (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2017).

[2] Bart Schuurman et al., "End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology That Should Not Have Been," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 8 (2019).

phenomenon on different explanatory levels, and not exclusively focus on personal characteristics or trajectories of individual perpetrators. This is not a new perspective. For example, in her 1995 study of political violence in Italy and Germany, Donatella della Porta[3] situated individual life trajectories of activists participating in political violence within groups operating in interaction with other groups, as well as with the police, all this taking place in a changing broader political landscape. Going further back, Martha Crenshaw in her 1981 article "The Causes of Terrorism"[4] highlighted the need for considering such causes on at least three levels: the societal background preconditions and precipitants; the (potentially) terrorist organization and its strategic decisions; and individual propensities and motivations.

There is nevertheless a strong tendency, on the part of both authorities and in much research, to focus merely on the individual level, both regarding explanations and prevention of terrorism. Not considering broader social conditions tends to result in rather shallow, and possibly depoliticizing, theories according to some critics.[5] This individualistic tendency is somewhat counterbalanced in the broader study of collectively organized and perpetrated political violence, but it appears to remain strong when researchers build explanations for lone actor terrorism. Because we are dealing with lone actors, it is not surprising that researchers are sensitized towards the individual level, and individual risk factors and life trajectories may indeed provide important partial explanations. However, especially sociologically-minded researchers also need to pose questions that regard collective and societal processes contributing to terrorist acts, even individual ones. Think of Durkheim's classic study on suicide,[6] which, with all its methodological problems (by today's standards), provides *the* paradigmatic decentring of the individual as sole explanatory factor for even the most personal of acts. Higher-level social explanations are admittedly less likely to provide us with sufficient causal explanations for each individual case. On the other hand, they may tell us more about variations of a phenomenon over time and space.

How then, could a multi-level approach be applied to the online sphere and its impact on lone actor political violence? Below I will deal with this question from the top down, starting with a discussion about the macro-level context, moving on to meso-level online interactive processes, before arriving at the online impact on the micro-level individual trajectories of lone actors. These levels resemble Crenshaw's three levels of settings, organizational reasons, and individual psychology.[7] However, they are distinct, partly because I here focus solely on mechanisms involving online activities, partly

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[3] Donatella della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State: Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
[4] Martha Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism," *Comparative Politics* 13, no. 4 (1981).
[5] Arun Kundnani, *A Decade Lost: Rethinking Radicalisation and Terrorism* (London: Claystone, 2015).
[6] Emile Durkheim, *On Suicide* [Le Suicide: Étude de Sociologie] (London: Penguin, 2006).
[7] Crenshaw, "The Causes of Terrorism."

because the model is not focusing on terrorist organizations but on less organized – autonomous[8] – forms on political violence, including lone actor activities. My arguments here will be theoretical, drawing on previous research, including that of myself and colleagues.[9] I make no claim that the mechanisms identified below are equally important for everyone ending up as a lone acting terrorist – especially considering that online interactions are of much less importance for some perpetrators than for others. What I do claim is that the processes I point out may combine with other factors in causal chains that lead to political violence.

The online discursive context of political violence

When people are mobilized to take political action – including *violent* political action – it is typically possible to connect it with conditions in society that may be perceived as unjust or threatening. In the case of Islamist terrorism, scholars highlight, for example, international conflicts, historic injustices, as well as more proximate factors such as ethnic segregation and discrimination. In relation to far-right violence, economic deprivation and increased levels of immigration are sometimes brought up as background causes in public debates as well as in some scholarly work. However, structural inequalities, societal risks and individual hardships all need to become considered as problems, preferably *collective* problems, to give rise to political action. They need to become what social movement scholars term *grievances*.

What constitutes an unjust condition is both dependent on value judgements combined with ideas about the severity of the condition, and not all grievances that mobilize political action are grounded in factual conditions. Consequently, political violence is not necessarily perpetrated by those most aggrieved, in objective terms, but not seldom by more resourceful societal groups who feel threatened, on real grounds or otherwise. Indications of certain objective conditions may indeed support arguments that they constitute a social problem, but such arguments need active discursive work.

Furthermore, while social movement scholarship acknowledges the importance of grievances, especially from the perspective of political actors themselves, it is a widely accepted observation that grievances are not sufficient for people to take (collective) political action. The decision to take action, as well as about what kind of action to take, is also dependent what opportunities people see to influence politics. Such opportunities are shaped by what social movement theorists call the *political*

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[8] della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State*.
[9] Anton Törnberg and Mattias Wahlström, "Unveiling the Radical Right Online: Exploring Framing and Identity in an Online Anti-Immigrant Discussion Group," *Sociologisk forskning* 55, no. 2-3 (2018); Mattias Wahlström and Anton Törnberg, "Social Media Mechanisms for Right-Wing Political Violence in the 21st Century: Discursive Opportunities, Group Dynamics, and Co-Ordination," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Forthcoming). Mattias Wahlström, Anton Törnberg and Hans Ekbrand "Dynamics of violent and dehumanizing rhetoric in far-right social media" *New Media & Society* (Forthcoming)

opportunity structure.[10] When a political opportunity structure becomes more open, opportunities for political influence open up, around which people more easily become politically mobilized. Conversely, a closed political opportunity structure, limiting political influence through regular channels, may push some groups (or for that matter individuals) within a broader movement towards using violent means to push for their demands.[11]

It is important to keep in mind that both political opportunities and grievances need to be perceived and interpreted as such to have an impact on political action.[12] An opportunity not discovered is no opportunity. Likewise, a potential injustice is not a social problem until it becomes regarded as one. In the case of acts of far-right violence, I would argue that these are *not* caused by the presence of migrants or any ethnic, racialized or sexual minorities in society. Instead, they are related to more or less widely held ideas, norms and values, based on which specific minority groups may be constructed as a problem. When political actors push for a social problem definition, and for solutions to it, their struggle is carried out in a discursive context that both provides resources and the potential that a political message will find resonance with more broadly held ideas and values in society. Koopmans and Statham uses the term *discursive opportunity structure* for this broader discursive context, which according to them determines "which ideas are considered 'sensible,' which constructions of reality are seen as 'realistic,' and which claims are held as 'legitimate' within a certain polity at a specific time."[13] Ferree and colleagues[14] highlight the role of meaning making institutions for the discursive opportunity structure, in particular mass media.

Applying these insights specifically to the wave of far-right violence in Germany, Koopmans and Olzak argued that "media attention to radical right violence, public reactions by third actors to radical right violence, and public controversies surrounding the targets of such violence can encourage or discourage violent acts".[15] They highlight three components of the mass media discursive opportunity structure that contributes to the likelihood of violent political actions: *visibility*, the attention such actions tend to get; *resonance*, the amount and type of public reactions to far-right claims and actions;

[10] Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
[11] Ruud Koopmans, "Explaining the Rise of Racist and Extreme Right Violence in Western Europe: Grievances or Opportunities?," *European Journal of Political Research* 30, no. 2 (1996).
[12] Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, "The Political Context of Social Movements," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements. 2nd Ed.*, ed. David A Snow, et al. (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2019); Joost de Moor and Mattias Wahlström, "Narrating Political Opportunities: Explaining Strategic Adaptation in the Climate Movement," *Theory & Society* 48, no. 3 (2019).
[13] Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, "Ethnicand Civic Conceptions of Nationhood and the Diferetial Success of the Extreme Right in Germany and Italy," in *How Social Movements Matter*, ed. Marco Giugni, Doug McAdam, and Charles Tilly (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p. 228.
[14] Myra Marx Ferree et al., *Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[15] Ruud Koopmans and Susan Olzak, "Discursive Opportunities and the Evolution of Right-Wing Violence in Germany," *American Journal of Sociology* 110, no. 1 (2004): p. 199.

and *legitimacy*, the degree that the (violent) far-right struggle receives support in the population. Their findings indicated that in particular visibility appears to have an escalating effect on far-right violence. Later studies appear to support these findings, although it seems that more direct reactions by peers are more consequential than the degree of support – or indeed criticism – in wider society.[16]

In an ongoing research project, my colleagues[17] and I depart from an observation that because the theory of discursive opportunities was developed to explain far-right violence during 1990s, when mass media remained the predominant meaning making institution, contemporary applications need to take into consideration the fundamental shifts in the media landscape during the recent decades.[18] Not only have we seen an explosive growth in online consumption of news media, from both established sources and "alternative media"; we have also witnessed the entry of online social media. The latter, sometimes referred to as Web 2.0, builds on interactivity and user-generated content, such as online forums and discussion boards, including (but far from limited to) major platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter. This introduces new dynamics of how news and information that shape our perception of the world are created and disseminated. People are no longer exclusively passive mass media consumers, but comment, share, and even produce 'news.'

Hence, in contrast to Koopmans and Olzak's seminal study,[19] the discursive opportunity structure can no longer be adequately captured by studying news items in printed newspapers. To understand the broader discursive context of political violence, one has to include alternative media and social media. In the case of the far right, particular attention of course needs to be paid to dedicated forums such as Stormfront, as well as far-right Facebook groups and various sub-Reddits and threads on 4chan. In our research project, we have studied discourse on open social media groups and forums with a relatively wide reach. Using close reading of forum content combined with automated "big-data" analysis, such as topic modelling, we study the dynamics of online discourse that might contribute to far-right political violence. We also currently study how local background conditions interact with alternative media content in setting conditions for arson attacks against refugee housing facilities in Sweden (thereby focusing on more frequently occurring but comparatively low-level political violence).

Of course, traditional mass media have not been completely displaced "new media." People still consume material produced by mass media, and often mass media contributes to the diffusion of social media content. Most of us would not know what Donald Trump wrote in his tweets unless it was reported by mainstream media outlets. On the other hand, many mass media items would not

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[16] Robert Braun and Ruud Koopmans, "Watch the Crowd: Bystander Responses, Trickle-Down Politics, and Xenophobic Mobilization," *Comparative political studies* 47, no. 4 (2014).
[17] Anton Törnberg, Hans Ekbrand, University of Gothenburg, and Petter Törnberg. Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet), grant number 2016-03515.
[18] Wahlström and Törnberg, "Social Media Mechanisms for Right-Wing Political Violence in the 21st Century."
[19] Koopmans and Olzak, "Discursive Opportunities and the Evolution of Right-Wing Violence in Germany."

become news at all, had they not first 'gone viral' on social media. Furthermore, through their self-selected online networks, people are disproportionately exposed to news items that confirm their preconceptions, in what has suggestively been termed "echo-chambers." This effect can also be amplified by the algorithms of social media platforms, which suggest content to users that they are likely to agree with, thus producing the closely related phenomenon of "filter bubbles."[20]

These developments indicate an increased fragmentation of the public sphere into many, sometimes conflicting, online counterpublics. People may today live geographically close but nevertheless in very different media realities.[21] The crucial components of the discursive opportunity structure identified by Koopmans and Olzak[22] also appear to work differently in the contemporary media landscape.[23] Whereas the *visibility* of violent actions in a context where widespread diffusion of news is controlled by editors and journalists acting as gatekeepers, this function has become much more circumscribed by the possibility to achieve widespread diffusion through social media. In fact, we noted that in the contemporary Web 2.0 era, visibility becomes directly dependent on *resonance* – if many people react strongly to an action (positively or negatively) this leads to re-posting and, by extension, increased visibility. Furthermore, a generally low support for far-right violence in the mainstream public sphere, is likely to become less important in comparison with the potentially strong *legitimacy* it might receive in the far-right social media groups and alternative media outlets that a perpetrator might frequent. Thus, several of the changes to the discursive opportunity structure brought about by social media seem to be conducive to far-right violence, especially considering that the far right in many countries has become so successful in establishing itself online.

That online content indeed appears to have an effect on far-right violence is supported in a recent study by Müller and Schwartz.[24] Studying the Facebook page of Alternativ für Deutschland (AfD) they map fluctuations in posts about refugees over time and find significant positive correlations between these and anti-refugee hate crimes in localities with high Facebook use. Notably, when they ingeniously introduce a control variable for local Internet disruptions, they show that the effect disappears during the periods when Facebook is not generally accessible. Of course, the impact of the

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[20] The severity of these effects is debated, and some studies even argue that social media use actually increases the chance to encounter news content from the other end of the political spectrum. See, for example: Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel, and Justin M. Rao, "Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 80, no. S1 (2016). However, it is not only the exposure of contradicting news itself that matters, but also how it is framed. In following right-wing discussion forums we also noted how mainstream news were shared together with derogatory or sarcastic comments, further reinforcing the dominant perspective in the group in a form of "trench warfare" dynamic. See Wahlström and Törnberg, "Social Media Mechanisms for Right-Wing Political Violence in the 21st Century."
[21] Törnberg and Wahlström, "Unveiling the Radical Right Online."
[22] Koopmans and Olzak, "Discursive Opportunities and the Evolution of Right-Wing Violence in Germany."
[23] See more extensive argument in Wahlström and Törnberg, "Social Media Mechanisms for Right-Wing Political Violence in the 21st Century."
[24] Karsten Müller and Carlo Schwarz, "Fanning the Flames of Hate: Social Media and Hate Crime " SSRN, http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3082972 Accessed 23 June 2020. (Incidentally, they do not theorize their findings in terms of discursive opportunity effects.)

discursive opportunity structure on lone acting terrorists is difficult to demonstrate directly through statistical correlation because of the comparatively low numbers of incidents. And since it is a macro-level effect it is not feasible to qualitatively identify a causal chain from the discursive opportunity structure down to the single violent act. However, it arguably does provide a context that may facilitate (or indeed counteract) lower level processes.

Online interactional processes

Treating the social media environment as a discursive opportunity structure for political violence admittedly does not do justice to the interactional nature of social media. A fundamental aspect of most social media platforms is that people do not just read material, or sometimes post their own content, but also respond and react to each other. People share each others' posts, images and videos, post comments and signal their emotional reactions through 'like' or 'reaction' buttons, depending on the possibilities – 'affordances' – offered by the platform. This makes *trans-local group dynamics*[25] possible, which to some degree could be functionally similar to the cognitive and affective dynamics of political groups that lead them to use (and continue using) violent means.[26] One unique power of the 'trans-locality' is the possibility to globally connect people with obscure and extreme views, who in the pre-Web 2.0 era would rarely get the chance to interact, allowing them to support each other and reinforce each others' views.

With respect to *cognitive* dynamics, I have already mentioned the "echo-chamber" dynamics within which disagreements or diverging opinions are downplayed or collectively ridiculed. At the same time, participants in far-right forums together develop and reinforce collective constructions of what they consider to be urgent social problems and what needs to be done about them. As a case in point, studied by me and my colleagues, is the Swedish far-right Facebook group currently named #Sverigeärfullt (Eng. 'Sweden is full', until 2019 named "Stand up for Sweden"), which with its currently around 150,000 members is one of the largest political Facebook groups in Sweden. This discussion group is a good example of an online counterpublic targeting a large right-wing anti-immigrant audience, compared to the far more devout far-right extremists that, for example, Stormfront seems to attract. Nevertheless, the members jointly collect personal stories and news items with which they collectively paint a bleak and threatening picture of Sweden as a country ridden by criminality and on its way to complete Islamization.[27] Swedish parliamentary politicians (except those

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[25] Wahlström and Törnberg, "Social Media Mechanisms for Right-Wing Political Violence in the 21st Century."
[26] See, e.g., della Porta, *Social Movements, Political Violence and the State*; *Clandestine Political Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*.
[27] Wahlström, Törnberg and Ekbrand "Dynamics of violent and dehumanizing rhetoric in far-right social media"

belonging to the far-right Sweden Democrat party) are accused of passively watching while Swedish women are allegedly raped by immigrant men and other vulnerable groups robbed and harassed:

> When our women and girls are raped, robbed and humiliated, then communication is over. It would never have happened if they had never come here. It is no more complicated than that. The laws of nature always apply, regardless of what some bribed ministers and mass media tell you.[28]

The juxtaposition of such stories with discussions about dysfunctional police, medical services and eldercare, creates a general sense of a society on the brink.

While many users in the group express that problems will be solved once the Sweden Democrats come to power, people also allude to violent solutions. Whereas discussions in closed social media groups can become more detailed and explicitly violent, it is telling that even in an open forum one can find numerous violent statements about "what should be done" to the criminal immigrants. These include instrumental violence in connection with expelling people from the country, as well as moral violence as retribution against alleged violent perpetrators. The perceived inaction of the police against criminality also leads to discussions about organizing in vigilante groups. (Indeed, the international anti-immigrant vigilante franchise *Soldiers of Odin* was started as a result of discussions in a Finnish Facebook group.)[29] We also found that comments in the group (especially those related to the above topics) abound with *dehumanizing* expressions, which many scholars argue contribute to a mind-set that removes inhibitions against violence towards people regarded as "less than human".[30] Among comments on posts about criminal activities one finds comments such as these:

> These so-called humans would be best suited as offal, to feed the pigs. The vermin must be obliterated from our Sweden.

> I hope pest control chemicals work on these apes and rats!

In sum, without necessarily producing coherent ideological manifestos, these types of far-right Facebook groups produce and reinforce joint cognitive tools for both motivating and legitimating violence.

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[28] Comment in the open far-right Swedish Facebook group 'Sweden is full'. Translated with slight adjustments to preserve anonymity.

[29] Tommi Kotonen, "The Soldiers of Odin Finland: From a Local Movement to an International Franchise," in *Vigilantism against Migrants and Minorities*, ed. Tore Bjørgo and Miroslav Mareš (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

[30] David Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011); Nick Haslam and Steve Loughnan, "Dehumanization and Infrahumanization," *Annual review of psychology* 65 (2014).

However, one might ask to what extent social media can provide something equivalent to the *affective* dynamics of political groups that turn to violent strategies. I here think, in particular, of the sometimes intense solidarity, loyalty and commitment that is built among members in radical political groups.[31] The strength of such affective ties seems to become amplified by joint participation in high-risk political actions, especially those of violent confrontation with opponents or authorities.[32] While the affective ties and emotional dynamics of online groups would rarely – if ever – reach similar intensity, online interaction in social media discussion groups may raise feelings of community[33] and at least rudimentary constructions of collective identity, based on common enemies, injustices and/or threats. In a previous study,[34] Törnberg and I find that such depictions of injustices and enemies "are often manifested or evoked in the discussions through certain 'sacred symbols' such as the flag, national anthem and various Swedish traditions, such as Midsummer's Eve and the national day."[35]

Many contributors also appear to experience a high level of engagement, frequently returning to the forum to post and comment, which indicates that participation in these groups and forums is highly rewarding. Interaction in online far-right forums could therefore be regarded as a way of keeping up engagement on political issues and escalating feelings of moral indignation that could act as a motor for taking (possibly violent) political action.

To clarify similarities and differences in how interaction in 'offline' settings and social media respectively contribute to community, group solidarity, collective moral standards and emotional support, Randall Collins' theory of *interaction ritual chains*[36] is a useful analytical lens.[37] According to Collins, society is essentially tied together by chains of interaction rituals in which participants gather together in more or less bounded settings to interact with a common mood and mutual focus of attention on an object or activity. Collins argues that people are drawn to interaction rituals in which they expect to experience a boost of *emotional energy*, stemming from the micro-dynamics of interaction among participants in these rituals. According to the theory, interaction rituals do not need to be rituals in the formal sense, but require only co-presence among participants in which the awareness of the common mood and focus amplifies the emotional tone of the group. Collins, writing in 2004, is clear about not regarding computer mediated communication as a medium for interaction rituals, partially since written (and non-synchronous) communication does not allow for the more subtle forms of interaction that raises the emotional energy in an interaction ritual. However,

[31] Della Porta, *Clandestine Political Violence*.
[32] Abby Peterson, *Contemporary Political Protest: Essays on Political Militancy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).
[33] Willem De Koster and Dick Houtman, "'Stormfront Is Like a Second Home to Me'," *Information, Communication and Society* 11 (2008); Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*.
[34] Törnberg and Wahlström, "Unveiling the Radical Right Online."
[35] Ibid. p.
[36] Randall Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Princeton university press, 2004).
[37] See also Wahlström and Törnberg, "Social Media Mechanisms for Right-Wing Political Violence in the 21st Century."

DiMaggio and colleagues[38] make a case for treating online written interaction as simply another genre with its own particular conditions and possibilities for successful interaction rituals. Arguably, this genre of interaction rituals has several sub-genres, depending on the varying affordances of different online platforms.

Interactions on far-right social media settings do lack some of the intensity and directness that would come with the co-presence among members of a political group, meeting in real life. However, participants may still build up emotional energy through mutual "liking", "reacting", sharing and commenting. In the "Sweden is full" Facebook group that we studied we could find numerous examples of posts with several hundreds of comments and shares, and several thousands of likes and other reactions. Among those with the strongest reactions and largest numbers of comments were those that featured some form of victimization story with immigrants as violent perpetrators. For example, a personal story about young woman allegedly assaulted by immigrants (1,100 shares and 4,600 reactions) gave rise to 800 comments, most of which was read and liked by several other users. Moving from initial hopes for "harsh punishments" for the perpetrators and expressed fears for Swedish women in general, comments in the thread occasionally "peaked" in calls for deadly violence, as vengeance or in self-defense. Also the very harshest comments received several likes by other users, providing an encouraging atmosphere where commenters collaborate in setting an aggressive mood.

Such interaction rituals are more protracted in time, and arguably less subtle than rituals with physically co-present participants, but they may still do the work to create a sense of cohesion and reward from participating. On Facebook, the top post becomes the mutual focus for the commenters, who can watch each other reacting in a similar way to themselves, contributing to a sense of commonality. However, users commenting on a Facebook top post only directly see the most recent comments, which inhibits continuity in discussion. The kind of emotional build-up that one might see in a more continuous interaction sequence in offline interaction is typically limited to a series of direct reactions to the initial post and pockets of short interactions among commenters. This way, dissenting voices can also be easily ignored, contributing to a sense of unanimity in the community.

Mark Sageman has argued in relation to online militant Jihadi networks that the "intensity of feelings developed online rival those developed offline."[39] This could possibly occur in more closed forums where participants interact on a more intimate and personal level. However, if one compares online forums overall to militant groups and organizations in terms of interactional processes that might contribute to political violence, most online environments seem less emotionally intense. Still, in the

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[38] Paul DiMaggio et al., "Interaction Ritual Threads: Does Irc Theory Apply Online? ," in *Ritual, Emotion, Violence: Studies on the Micro-Sociology of Randall Collins*, ed. Elliot B Weininger, Annette Lareau, and Omar Lizardo (New York: Routledge, 2019).
[39] Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad*, p. 114.

absence of active participation in a militant group, also broader forums might produce cognitive and affective group processes that reinforce values and worldviews, as well as emotional and moral engagement. Luckily, comparing the numbers of participants in some of the far-right discussion forums with the far lower numbers of incidents of far-right political violence we can be pretty sure that the overwhelming majority of participants will not transform their online engagement into violent actions offline. Still, for some individuals these interactions may become an important contribution to their decision to use violent means towards their political ends.

Online impact on individual trajectories

How, then, do these higher-level dynamics of discursive opportunity structures and trans-local group dynamics translate into individual trajectories towards using political violence? Looking specifically at lone acting terrorists on the far right, there are clearly different trajectories, and online environments can have not only different degrees of influence, but also have somewhat different functions.[40] For some lone actors, the online milieu becomes a complement to engagement other militant political networks, for others it may even be the only connection they have to far-right networks. For those not yet committed to the cause, an online far-right group may provide inspiration for new ways to articulate grievances, whereas for others with already articulate political beliefs, online far-right social media forums may provide an audience for their ideas, providing them with a sense of recognition and support.

On a very basic level, one might say that far-right online environments may contribute to one or more of the following arguably necessary requirements for committing an act of political violence: *motivation* to carry out the act, a sense that violent means are *legitimate*, and the *capacity* to carry out the act (which for a terrorist act includes practical knowledge of constructing/obtaining and using weapons).[41] The above discussion has established that online milieus clearly have the potential to increase motivation and sense of legitimacy for perpetrators of far-right political violence. The environments both provide ideas about urgent social problems and media through which acts of political violence can receive public attention, even of a supportive kind. Motivation can be further increased by the affective group dynamics that occur online. Online interactions also provide a higher political purpose as well as rationalizations that may legitimize violence; in particular, the frequent use of dehumanizing expressions may contribute to an actual sense that one's target group is less than

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[40] Malthaner and Lindekilde, "Constructions of Terrorism."; Lasse Lindekilde, Stefan Malthaner, and Francis O'Connor, "Peripheral and Embedded: Relational Patterns of Lone-Actor Terrorist Radicalization," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 12, no. 1 (2019).
[41] Wahlström and Törnberg, "Social Media Mechanisms for Right-Wing Political Violence in the 21st Century."

human or even a toxic element in society.[42] Overviews of lone actor terrorist attacks have also found that in many cases perpetrators had downloaded manuals or otherwise obtained information online about how to construct bombs and weapons.[43] However, the high rate of failed attempts based on such manuals indicates that online sources often have more limited use without sufficient military training.

However, I would argue that an adequate understanding of how potential far-right terrorists actually go from exposure of online content to internalizing the beliefs, values, motivations and skills, requires some further unpacking of this process. While I acknowledge that there are several important elements in individual trajectories towards lone actor terrorism – as discussed by, inter alia, Lindekilde and colleagues[44] – I would argue that the specific impact of far-right social media on some lone actors is best conceived as a contribution to a *learning process*.[45] In criminology, the insight that motivation, rationalizations and appropriate skills need to be learnt in order to commit crimes was originally developed by Edwin Sutherland in his *differential association theory*.[46] In short, the theory states that people start committing criminal acts, not primarily as a result of inherent individual characteristics, but because they learn criminal behaviour in interaction with other people. Depending on with whom you interact (how often and how closely) – hence, *differential association* – people learn different *definitions* of what is desirable, what one should do to reach it, and whether to stick to the law in this pursuit. The currently most influential version of the theory – now called *social learning theory* – was developed by Ronald Akers to address what he regarded as Sutherland's insufficiently developed ideas about mechanisms for learning.[47] Inspired by behavioural psychology, he emphasized particularly the role of *reinforcement* in learning. To Sutherland's concepts of *differential association* and *definitions*, social learning theory adds two more core elements: *differential reinforcement*, which is the balance of positive and negative expected consequences of actions, largely based on responses from peers; and *imitation*, which captures our tendency to replicate the behaviour of others.

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[42] Rhiannon S Neilsen, "'Toxification'as a More Precise Early Warning Sign for Genocide Than Dehumanization? An Emerging Research Agenda," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 9, no. 1 (2015); Livingstone Smith, *Less Than Human*.

[43] Clare Ellis et al., *Lone-Actor Terrorism: Analysis Paper*, Countering Lone-Actor Terrorism Series (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2016).

[44] Lindekilde, Malthaner, and O'Connor, "Peripheral and Embedded."

[45] See also Wahlström, Törnberg and Ekbrand "Dynamics of violent and dehumanizing rhetoric in far-right social media"

[46] Edwin H Sutherland, Donald R Cressey, and David F Luckenbill, *Principles of Criminology. 11th Ed.* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1992).

[47] Ronald Akers, *Social Learning and Social Structure: A General Theory of Crime and Deviance* (Routledge, 2009).

The theory has previously been applied to terrorist violence.[48] and even specifically to demonstrate the impact of online content on political violence.[49] Indeed, the different elements are rather illustrative for conceptualizing the individual-level connections between the online context and social media interactions and a prospective lone actor terrorist. A person may seek out a far-right online group which seems to fit with previous attitudes and ideas (*definitions*) that a person has acquired in other social associations. If not active at first, the person may eventually start *imitating* the discourse in the group. When thus taking the step to participate in posting and commenting in the group, positive reactions by peers becomes *reinforcement* of beliefs and values that one might initially just tentatively express. (With reference to Collins' theory discussed above,[50] one could argue that it is the *emotional energy* resulting from successful online interaction rituals, which constitutes the mechanism of reinforcement.) Positive peer reactions to shared stories and news reports of terrorist acts may also perform the function of reinforcing beliefs in the justification of such actions. Clearly, the association with online far-right milieus may be counterbalanced – or reinforced – by associations with people outside of these environments, depending on the respective strength, intensity and frequency of these associations.

Implications of a multi-level processual perspective on lone actor political violence

The rather eclectic theoretical framework presented in this essay is not intended as a complete theory of lone actor political violence on the far right. Instead it is an attempt to identify specific mechanisms for how a far-right online environment, and social media in particular, may impact on lone actor terrorism. The theoretical framework contributes to understanding especially those lone actors with weak offline connections and strong immersion in far-right milieus online. The model also generally illustrates how even lone actors may be situated in interactional contexts, which in turn are conditioned by a discursive opportunity structure. Thereby, I hope to show possibilities for decentring research on lone actors from its overly strong focus on individual characteristics and individual trajectories.

It is indeed possible to construct explanations for how individual perpetrators go through learning processes, in online and offline social contexts, which increase their propensity for using political violence. However, such explanations do not address why those interactional contexts for social learning are there in the first place. Furthermore, an important precondition for those interactional

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[48] Ronald L Akers and Adam Silverman, "Toward a Social Learning Model of Violence and Terrorism," in *Violence: From Theory to Research*, ed. Margaret A. Zahn, Henry H. Brownstein, and Shelly L. Jackson (London: Routledge, 2004).

[49] Lieven Pauwels and Nele Schils, "Differential Online Exposure to Extremist Content and Political Violence: Testing the Relative Strength of Social Learning and Competing Perspectives," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 28, no. 1 (2016).

[50] Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

contexts is the discursive opportunity structure in which they are situated. Importantly, just as the individual predisposition for political violence is not a fixed characteristic, but changes over time in interactional processes, the mechanisms on higher explanatory levels can also be approached from a processual perspective. The interaction rituals in an online forum are of course in themselves micro-processes, but an important question for further inquiry is how the character of such interactions change over time. Likewise, as I argued already in the introduction to this essay, the discursive opportunity structure for political violence changes over time in ways that may impact on lower-level processes leading to political violence.

Maintaining a multi-level perspective on political violence is not just an academic matter. Current prevention efforts directed against political violence and terrorism tend to focus on individual risk factors and individual 'radicalization'. Contemporary state agencies are on an ongoing – but arguably futile – quest to find the magic bullet for proactively intervening against individuals 'at risk' of becoming 'violent extremists.' Acknowledging higher level processes, also for lone perpetrators, raises important questions about how to address the preconditions for individual 'radicalization,' online and offline. This is not to say that state intervention efforts on these levels are simple or necessarily unproblematic from a democratic perspective. However, a broader focus is surely more fruitful in the long run.