

## **Taking the Red Pill: Ideological Motivations for Spreading Online Disinformation**

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### **Abstract**

This paper addresses the ideological motivations of members of far-right internet subcultures who spread misinformation and disinformation online. These groups recruit like-minded individuals who believe that white, male identities and conservative belief systems are under attack from a range of outside forces. They often greatly distrust the mainstream media, which they believe to be dominated by liberal ideology and "politically correct" culture. As group members are radicalized – a process they refer to as "redpilling" – their ideologies and distrust of the media feed on each other and ultimately inform a broader shift in their understanding of reality and veracity. As a result, they may view highly ideological and factually incorrect information as truthful, thus complicating understandings of disinformation.

## **Taking the Red Pill: Ideological Motivations for Spreading Online Disinformation**

The role of “fake news,” misinformation, and propaganda in spreading inaccurate information online came to prominence during the run-up to the 2016 election and remains an area of wide concern. Previous research has identified a variety of motivations behind such content, including financial interests (for instance, hyper-partisan clickbait content that promotes audience engagement), the political interests of state actors (such as computational propaganda spread by Russian actors on platforms like Twitter), trolling and disruption (for example, imageboard denizens who spread wild rumors for entertainment), and the desire for fame (as influencers like Milo Yiannopolous and Mike Cernovich came to prominence during GamerGate and have increased their online footprints by adopting alt-right beliefs) (Caplan & boyd, in press; Woolley & Howard, 2016). For the last year and a half, our team at Data & Society has conducted research into the manipulation of the mainstream media by far-right internet subcultures, including white supremacists, men’s rights activists, 4chan and 8chan users, trolls, and conspiracy theorists (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

For those on the far-right, recruiting like-minded individuals and converting them to their way of thinking is a primary driver of online participation. While these groups have robust online communities, blogs, podcasts and the like, the mainstream media offers a significant opportunity to set agendas, frame current issues, and spread their messaging to a larger and more diverse audience. Since these groups often adhere to conspiratorial thinking which maintains that white,

male identities and conservative belief systems are under attack from a hostile Other, whether that be people of color, Muslim immigrants, Jews, global elites, feminists, or the Illuminati, they share a sense of urgency and significance in growing their movement. At the same time, their ideological presuppositions justify what is often aggressive online and offline harassment of feminists, people of color, Jews, journalists, and so forth by presenting an alternate reality in which white men are the victims of an aggressively politically-correct liberal culture. While individuals may have a variety of reasons to participate in these subcultures, this essay discusses the ideological motivations behind these groups' spread of misinformation and disinformation online—that is, information that is incorrect, and information that is deliberately misleading (Jack, 2017).

### *Distrust of the Media*

Generally, far-right groups spreading mis- and disinformation have very low levels of trust in the mainstream media. To a certain extent, this is reflective of a larger trend; distrust in the media is at an all-time low nationwide, particularly among Republicans, where trust has dipped to 14% (Swift, 2016). Many right-leaning media consumers and young men more generally express frustration with the media's "PC culture," which they interpret as liberal bias, pointing to media ownership by liberal philanthropists like Jeff Bezos and Ted Turner as proof.

Far-right critiques of mainstream media go beyond perceived liberal bias. For years, self-described "trolls" have criticized the mainstream media for its overly sensational and emotionally manipulative tactics surrounding issues like pedophilia and the murders of young white women (Phillips, 2013). Separately, media consolidation at the corporate level has left "news deserts" in rural areas, meaning that rural news consumers may feel that local media fails

to represent their interests. At a time when social media has removed gatekeepers and allowed anyone with internet access to express their opinions, news outlets represent a more traditional, closed system of information distribution, which many members of far-right movements characterize as a distant elite. The extreme version of this belief system maintains that the media deliberately pulls the wool over the eyes of ordinary people in order to justify elite dominance, and often veers into familiar conspiracy theories about Jewish control. Similarly, the liberal beliefs of Silicon Valley media titans have increased distrust in social media platforms, especially when far-right participants believe that content moderation and trending topics favor left-wing viewpoints.

### *Redpilling and the Shifting Nature of Truth*

The process of “redpilling”—a shorthand for far-right radicalization—illustrates how far-right ideology and media distrust feed on each other and ultimately represent a broader shift in people’s perceptions of truth, disinformation, and propaganda. The term *redpilling* speaks to a kind of total revelation, a “waking up” to the realities of the world. The “red pill” refers to the scene in *The Matrix* in which the character Morpheus offers the protagonist Neo the option of taking a red pill or a blue pill. By taking the red pill, Neo sees “the truth” about the Matrix and his world is upended; had he taken the blue pill, he would have returned to his everyday life, none the wiser. In far-right circles, one is redpilled when they begin believing in a truth that is counterfactual to mainstream belief, which may include white supremacy, Holocaust denial, the danger that immigration posits for white Americans, the oppression of men by feminists, and so forth.

People often first become redpilled in one ideological area, which then serves as an entry point to redpilling in other areas. In other words, our research indicates that someone who has been redpilled on one issue is more likely to be redpilled on others. In this way, susceptibility to redpilling resembles susceptibility to conspiracy theories, as research has shown that one of the greatest predictors of belief in a conspiracy theory is belief in others (Douglas & Sutton, 2008). Most frequently, the world of Men’s Rights activism—fueled by a backlash to popular feminism, or a lack of romantic or sexual success—serves as an entry point for disaffected young men into white nationalism. Significantly, far-right groups attempting to radicalize people may encourage this piecemeal approach. On the white supremacist blog *Fash the Nation*, for instance, a series called “Red Pill 101” includes articles on “equality,” “race,” and “African Americans,” but also on “pornography,” which they believe Jews control and use as a strategy to make white men impotent.

The example above shows not only how redpilling leads to a broader radicalization, but also how quickly ideology and distrust of the media feed on each other throughout the process. This also explains the far-right’s proclivity for conspiracy theories. If someone begins to believe that white people are actually the oppressed race, it also means that everything that mainstream media is telling them is false. In white supremacist circles, it is widely believed that Jewish elites control the culture (specifically, the media) and are accelerating the destruction of the white race. So, as one becomes redpilled on white supremacy, he is also necessarily redpilled on the mainstream media. The more someone is radicalized against the mainstream media, the more the explanations of ideologues make sense to explain its shortcomings. Thus, redpilled individuals by their very nature distrust any “official story” given to them by mainstream media.

As a result, those who are redpilled fully reject and antagonize the mainstream media and its narratives, as well as traditional institutions of government, business, and education. Not only do the ideologies of the newly-radicalized shift, but their very definitions of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, as well as concepts of oppression and inclusion, do as well. Redpilling thus begins to inform an entirely different view of reality, epistemology, and veracity. Redpilled individuals may not view the content that they spread as mis or disinformation (although in many cases they strategically re-frame events to encourage adoption of their own belief systems), but as necessary in order to protect their own interests and fight for the survival of their very identities.

### *Misinformation vs. Disinformation*

In January 2016, four Chicago teens used Facebook Live to film themselves torturing a mentally disabled man, which received widespread media attention. Alt-right media personality, author, and blogger Mike Cernovich used Twitter's streaming app Periscope to talk to his followers, brainstorming a way to connect the event to larger ideological goals. Since the teenagers were African-American, Cernovich and his followers decided to link the kidnapers to Black Lives Matter, a movement for racial justice which the far-right often describes as a terrorist organization. (One goal of the far-right is getting the federal government to officially label BLM and movements like Antifa terrorist organizations, which would curtail their activities and justify federal action against members.) Using bots and fake accounts, Cernovich and his followers tweeted the hashtag #BLMKidnapping 480,000 times in 24 hours, causing it to trend on Twitter. While both Chicago police and BLM activists debunked the rumor, it spread widely on social media and was picked up by hyper-partisan news sites like Breitbart. The idea that the

kidnappers were BLM activists became so pervasive that it was mentioned in most media stories about the kidnapping, even if just to discredit it. Cernovich and his audience forcibly changed the way the story was framed by pushing out the hashtag. We consider this an example of *disinformation*, since Cernovich and his audience knew that BLM was not actually linked to the Chicago kidnapping. Instead, they propagated an alternate frame in order to further their larger ideological goals.

By contrast, consider how the far-right has propagated information about Antifa. Antifa is a term for antifascist groups who use direct action techniques to protest fascist and neo-Nazi thought, often through physical force. In the US, this has been a very small group until quite recently, made up primarily of college-age young people, often linked to anarchist and punk rock communities. In the current political climate, where far-right groups are more visible than in the last two decades, Antifa activism is growing in numbers.

The YouTube documentary [“America Under Siege: Antifa”](#) frames Antifa as a radical movement opposed not just to fascism, but to all mainstream conservatism. It presents both accurate historical information about Antifa’s European roots and complete inaccuracies, such as the idea that Antifa controls entire towns in East Germany and prevents any right-wing beliefs from being publicly discussed, or that Antifa is funded by George Soros. Some of the documentary’s claims are ideologically-slanted, but not actually incorrect; for instance, the claim that Antifa members dislike anyone who espouses “Western free enterprise system capitalism,” can be read as accurate in one sense, given that Antifa activists are primarily anarchists who by definition are opposed to capitalism. In another sense it is entirely *inaccurate* – Antifa activists do not, generally, attack “anyone” who supports the status quo. This murkiness, and the lack of understanding around intentionality, makes it difficult to determine whether this documentary is

strategic disinformation. Instead, it might be considered *misinformation*, inaccurate information spread unintentionally. If its creators and distributors are redpilled, they may be entirely convinced that their interpretation of Antifa is correct.

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