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A wolf in sheep's clothing: a mixed-methods analysis of the far-right alt-tech social media movement

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English Summary for the PhD Thesis by Jonathan Collins

This thesis tells the missing behavioural story of the far-right's migration to Alt-Tech platforms, examining Gab Social, a platform that functions not just as an echo chamber but as a thriving, diverse community. Through five peer-reviewed publications, it offers a cohesive and theory-driven account of the social dynamics driving this digital movement and the behavioural mechanisms that sustain it. Importantly, Gab Social's participants are not just radical voices shouting into the Alt-Tech ecosystem void; they are participants in a structured movement reshaping how we come to understand community, identity, and violence online. The research uses netnography, an immersive and reflexive methodology to understand the (sub)cultures, emotions, and psychosocial layers that drive far-right engagement on Gab. Multiple deep dive investigations into the platform reveal not just hate but also belonging, ontological purpose, and a sense of home. Moreover, these spaces do not simply reproduce ideology, but they also actively create, sustain, and weaponise it. Ultimately, the thesis aims to reframe how we understand Alt-Tech platforms, offering a new conceptual toolkit for academics and practitioners. It also shows that platforms like Gab Social are not just another far-right void to spew hatred but rather act as a consolidated movement, capable of mobilising users towards collective action and, in some cases, violence. Each chapter outlined below, which are either published or soon-to-be published, help tell this fascinating story.

Why should we even care about far-right extremism (and its violent manifestations) in the first place? Chapter 2 provides precisely that precedent and explanation. I argue that the far-right represents the next wave for the field, unpacking the growing number of terrorist incidents associated with the movement. Importantly, it showcases how online decentralised spaces can

motivate individuals towards extreme violence and how this violence does not need to be associated to any particular centralised organisation.

Chapter 3 provides an empirical and conceptual look into the baseline methodology, netnography. Through emphasising the many benefits that the technique offers, the work underlines the mechanisms we (the field of online extremism) are currently missing in our quest to better understand the far-right and other extreme online movements. At the same time, it provides a practical glimpse into the applications for the field, with a case study of Neo-Nazis on Gab Social. The developments towards this new way of knowledge production, vis-à-vis netnography, provide the impetus and framework for all future publications and chapters within this thesis.

Diving into the empirics within the following Chapter (4), I aimed to outline how societal insecurities are manipulated for users to mobilise on these platforms. Focusing on the COVID-19 crisis, the work demonstrates the hate-filled cyclical discursive model the far-right both simultaneously creates and needs to rally support. Moreover, it showcases that these virtual environments are tools to consolidate grievances and insecurities into unified collectives, bringing into focus key concepts such as identity, belonging, and community.

The purpose of Chapter 5 is to offer a new starting point, a rallying call for examining different psychosocial layers within Alt-Tech and other far-right online environments. Herein, the chapter outlines three key thematic patterns helping to explain Gab's success as a virtual platform: (1) fostering a sense of unity within its community; (2) constructing a new ontological worldview centered on conspiracies; and (3) defining in-group identity through dichotomous framings. Providing a deeper dive into the community-building discursive processes attributed to Gab

Social's continued success, it also illustrates a technocultural model with in-group superiority acting as the community's communicative baseline.

Chapter 6 uncovers users' positive affiliations to the virtual environment. Building off the conceptualisation of community in the previous chapter, I highlight the meso-construction and discursive emotions contributing to creating a new home on Alt-Tech platforms. Through feelings of societal rejection or grievances and the reattachment to an online space of communal positivity and a sense of belonging, far-right fringe media is transcending our epistemological framework of these platforms.

Finally, Chapter 7 avoids a simple retelling of each story, instead providing a unified theoretical contribution that connects the different chapters and outlines the larger implications of the Alt-Tech movement. Combining the elaborate and immersive findings from the previous chapters, I connect the technocultural elements of insecurity, identity, belonging, community, violence, and emotions to present these alternative virtual environments as a *decentralisation of sociality*. Here, users can be what they want, act how they want, believe what they want, and say what they want without (or with minimal) repercussions. This form of decentralisation allows, legitimises, and validates the disinhibition of societal normative values and creates room for the many far-right alternative epistemologies and ontologies – including the violent fantasies (and physical manifestations) of protecting the white race.