

House Homeland Security Committee
Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence

The Digital Battlefield:

How Terrorists Use the Internet and Online Networks for Recruitment and Radicalization

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Chairman Pfluger, Ranking Member Magaziner, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, on behalf of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, I am honored to appear before you to discuss the important topic of the digital battlefield, exploring how terrorists use the internet.

This testimony will focus on an important trend in online radicalization that my colleagues and I have been tracking for several years, which we refer to as *composite violent extremism* (CoVE). Composite violent extremism describes cases where individuals engage in or support acts of terrorism or targeted violence despite adhering to a mixture of ideological beliefs, grievances, and prejudices that do not fit neatly into traditional categories of extremism. Unlike conventional ideological radicalization, where individuals are drawn into well-defined extremist movements, CoVE involves the blending of disparate ideological elements, often shaped by online environments, personal grievances, and cultural influences.

Understanding composite violent extremism is important because its growing prevalence presents new challenges for counterterrorism efforts, law enforcement, and policymakers — and because it provides new opportunities for violent extremists. Traditional frameworks for identifying and countering violent extremism often rely on clear ideological categories, yet instances of composite violent extremism do not fit neatly into these classifications. Extremists increasingly draw from multiple, sometimes contradictory, ideological sources.

This testimony will proceed in two major parts. First, it explains the concept of composite violent extremism in greater detail, outlining its defining characteristics and how it differs from traditional forms of ideological radicalization. Second, the testimony will explore the specific challenges that CoVE presents for terrorism prevention efforts. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more effective strategies to counter evolving threats in the digital battlefield.

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In April 2022, Frank James opened fire on a New York subway train during rush hour, injuring 29 people. James’s voluminous online writings left authorities, experts, and the media scratching their heads about his motives. Some reports called him a black nationalist, while others pointed to more disparate racist and misogynist ideas. James expressed hatred toward white people, Jews, and Latinos as well as anti-American sentiments and political grievances — none of which amounted to a coherent ideology or aligned with any distinct ideological movement. Complicating matters, James also struggled with mental illness.

Was James’s shooting spree an act of violent extremism? If so, what kind? Scholars and practitioners have grappled with the increasing prominence of attackers like James who are ideologically idiosyncratic or even incoherent. In congressional testimony from 2022, for example, FBI Director Christopher Wray spotlighted extremists who hold a “weird hodgepodge blend of ideologies,” noting that this trend is producing challenges in “trying to unpack what are often sort of incoherent belief systems, combined with kind of personal grievances.” Indeed, it can be difficult to unpack such belief systems because practitioners have often lacked the conceptual tools necessary to comprehend extremists who defy neat categorization.

FBI director Wray described this phenomenon as “salad bar” extremism.¹ For well over half a decade, researchers have been trying to explain this phenomenon, employing terms like “ideological convergence,” “fused extremism,” “hybrid ideologies,” “fringe fluidity,” “ideology a la carte,” and “choose your own adventure” extremism — all of which have slightly different meanings and some of which only loosely relate to the FBI’s concept of salad bar extremism.² Indeed, cases that fit the so-called salad bar paradigm (for which I offer an alternative terminology and concrete ways to understand) are challenging to conceptualize and categorize in large part because it can be difficult to discern motives amid complex interplays of disparate beliefs, interests, prejudices, grievances, and personal risk factors. This testimony thus explains the concept of *composite violent extremism* (CoVE).³

The increased prominence of these attacks that challenge established categories of violent extremism are of clear interest to this subcommittee. My contribution today is to offer a conceptualization of these vexing varieties of violent extremism and offer potential explanations for their apparently increased frequency.

Background

In recent years, governments have begun expanding the scope of counterterrorism and prevention efforts to address ideologically ambiguous cases. DHS’s 2019 *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence* (the CTTV framework) and the United Kingdom’s mixed, unstable, and unclear (MUU) classification enable discussion of traditional terrorism alongside cases where an attacker lacks a clearly discernible ideology but where the intent and tactics resemble terrorism. Coupling terrorism

¹ FBI Director Christopher A. Wray, “A Review of the President’s Fiscal Year 2023 Funding Request for the Federal Bureau of Investigation,” *Testimony Before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies*, May 25, 2022. (<https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/hearings/a-review-of-the-presidents-fiscal-year-2023-funding-request-for-the-federal-bureau-of-investigation>); FBI Director Christopher A. Wray, “Threats to the Homeland,” *Testimony Before the Senate Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee*, September 24, 2020. (<https://www.hsgac.senate.gov/hearings/09-14-2020-threats-to-the-homeland>)

² See Julien Bellaiche, “Connecting the Fringes: Neo-Nazi Glorification of Salafi-Jihadi Representations Online,” *Global Network on Extremism and Terrorism*, August 24, 2021. (<https://gnet-research.org/2021/08/24/connecting-the-fringes-neo-nazi-glorification-of-salafi-jihadi-representations-online>); Ariel Koch, “The ONA Network and the Transnationalization of Neo-Nazi-Satanism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, January 12, 2022, pages 1172-1199. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2021.2024944>); Jesse J. Norris, “Idiosyncratic Terrorism: Disaggregating an Undertheorized Concept,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Volume 14, Number 3, June 2020. (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918296>); Milo Comerford and Sasha Havlicek, “Mainstreamed Extremism and the Future of Prevention” (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2021). (<https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/ISD-Mainstreamed-extremism-and-the-future-of-prevention-3.pdf>); Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, “Fluidity of the Fringes: Prior Extremist Involvement as a Radicalization Pathway,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, January 7, 2019, pages 555-578. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1531545>); Paige Pascarelli, “Ideology à la Carte: Why Lone Actor Terrorists Choose and Fuse Ideologies,” *Lawfare*, October 2, 2016. (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/ideology-%C3%A0-la-carte-why-lone-actor-terrorists-choose-and-fuse-ideologies>); Kurt Braddock, Brian Hughes, and Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “The Post-9/11 Fight Against Extremism Must Take On Propagandists’ Tricks, Not Just Ideology,” *MarketWatch*, September 11, 2021. (<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/the-post-9-11-fight-against-extremism-must-expand-to-attitudinal-inoculation-11631285779>)

³ I would like to acknowledge the work of three colleagues with whom I developed the concept of CoVE: Emelie Chace-Donahue, Madison Urban, and Andrew Zammit. See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Andrew Zammit, Emelie Chace-Donahue & Madison Urban, “Composite Violent Extremism: Conceptualizing Attackers Who Increasingly Challenge Traditional Categories of Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, March 29, 2023. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2194133>)

with this more ambiguously motivated violence is in part intended to strengthen prevention efforts. As DHS's strategy stated, these phenomena "overlap, intersect, and interact as problems" and thus "necessitate a shared set of solutions."⁴

DHS's 2019 CTTV framework was the first time a department-level U.S. strategy recognized terrorism and targeted violence within the same threat landscape. According to the framework, "targeted violence refers to any incident of violence in which a known or knowable attacker selects a particular target prior to the violent attack" (though it is worth noting that the framework also recommends the promulgation of an updated definition of the phenomenon of targeted violence).⁵ The CTTV framework goes on to note that "unlike terrorism, targeted violence includes attacks otherwise lacking a clearly discernible political, ideological, or religious motivation, but that are of such severity and magnitude as to suggest an intent to inflict a degree of mass injury, destruction, or death commensurate with known terrorist tactics."⁶

The U.K.'s Prevent Programme addresses traditional terrorism but goes a step beyond the CTTV framework by creating a specific category for less clearly discernible ideologies. The Prevent Programme includes the MUU classification for individuals referred to the program whose ideology or motivations challenge traditional categorizations.⁷ According to the program, MUU applies to cases "where the ideology presented involves a combination of elements from multiple ideologies (mixed), shifts between different ideologies (unstable), or where the individual does not present a coherent ideology yet may still be vulnerable to being drawn into terrorism (unclear)."⁸

Australian authorities have similarly demonstrated concern about ideologically unclear attacks, as shown by the proliferation of fixated threat assessment centers within state police counterterrorism functions. Fixated threat assessment centers aim to protect the public from individuals with an "obsessive preoccupation with a person or some idiosyncratic cause, which is pursued to a pathological degree" that can result in violence.⁹ These centers were not initially viewed as having a counterterrorism function, as they were largely concerned with individuals who were "fixated on a highly personal cause or grievance" rather than being ideologically motivated.¹⁰ The United Kingdom established a Fixated Threat Assessment Centre (FTAC) in 2006 due to persistent threats to the Royal Family from unstable individuals. This FTAC remained largely separate from the country's counterterrorism efforts. Australia's adoption of fixated threat assessment centers, which began with

⁴ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *Strategic Framework for Countering Terrorism and Targeted Violence*, September 2019, page 11. (https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/19_0920_plcy_strategic-framework-countering-terrorism-targeted-violence.pdf)

⁵ Ibid., page 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mark Townsend, "Anti-Terrorism Programme Must Keep Focus on Far Right, Say Experts," *Guardian* (UK), May 22, 2022. (<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/may/22/anti-terrorism-programme-must-keep-focus-on-far-right-say-experts>)

⁸ United Kingdom Home Office, "User Guide to: Individuals Referred to and Supported Through the Prevent Programme, England and Wales," December 5, 2024. (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales/user-guide-to-individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-england-and-wales>)

⁹ Michele T. Pathé, Timothy Lowry, Debbie J. Haworth, Danae M. Webster, Melodie J. Mulder, Paul Winterbourne, and Colin J. Briggs, "Assessing and Managing the Threat Posed by Fixated Persons in Australia," *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, Volume 26, Number 4, May 5, 2015, pages 425-438. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14789949.2015.1037332>)

¹⁰ Ibid., page 426.

the establishment of a center in Queensland in 2013, was initially modeled on the U.K.'s approach but increasingly came to involve a more explicit counterterrorism role.¹¹ For example, in 2017 both the New South Wales Police and Victoria Police established fixated threat assessment centers within their counterterrorism commands, showing that Australian counterterrorism approaches were broadening beyond a concern over individuals with clear ideological motivations.¹² In this way, the recognition that counterterrorism tools were relevant in this parallel context resembles the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's inclusion of targeted violence in the CTTV framework.

These policy and operational frameworks are significant steps, but more attention needs to be paid to understanding trends and common characteristics *within* targeted violence, MUU, and fixated threats. The CoVE framework, which I will now explain, accomplishes this. In 2022-23, I worked with a team of highly competent researchers — with the principal contributors being Emelie Chace-Donahue, Madison Urban, and Andrew Zammit — to better understand how cases like these fit within the violent extremism landscape. This team sought to develop a new conceptual framework with a clear overarching concept and a typology of subordinate concepts that disaggregated the different forms of violent extremism being observed. We sought to engage in a careful process of conceptualization, which began by identifying 94 cases of interest through existing datasets of violent extremists and mass shooters (including PIRUS and The Violence Project) along with less structured searches through Google. I will now outline our overarching conclusions.¹³

Composite Violent Extremism and Its Subordinate Categories

The framework's overarching concept is composite violent extremism, or CoVE. *Composite*, a term denoting something made up of various parts or elements, encompasses the concept of an amalgamated extremist outlook at the broadest level. The three subordinate categories in the typology demonstrate the different types of amalgamation that composite violent extremism covers. However, it is important to clarify what the concept of composite violent extremism does not cover.

At one end of a spectrum, composite violent extremism does not encompass violent extremists who possess a discernible ideology that is not combined with other sentiments or cooperation with adherents of other ideologies. This means the concept does not cover the phenomenon of fringe fluidity, wherein an extremist switches *in full* from one ideology to another. It also means the concept potentially does not cover cases that would be examples of *unstable* under the MUU criteria, unless the ideological shifts did not encompass the wholesale adoption of new ideology but instead involved amalgamation in some form.

¹¹ Ibid., pages 425-438.

¹² Paul Farrell, "NSW Police Establish 'Fixated Persons' Unit to Help Counter Lone Wolf Terror Attacks," *The Guardian* (UK), April 25, 2017. (<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/apr/26/nsw-police-establish-fixated-persons-unit-to-help-counter-lone-wolf-terror-attacks>); Premier of Victoria, "New Threat Assessment Centre to Keep Victorians Safe," October 3, 2017. (<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/new-threat-assessment-centre-to-keep-victorians-safe>)

¹³ I believe that methodological explanations are out of place in congressional testimony. For those who are interested in our methodological approach, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, Andrew Zammit, Emelie Chace-Donahue & Madison Urban, "Composite Violent Extremism: Conceptualizing Attackers Who Increasingly Challenge Traditional Categories of Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, March 29, 2023, pages 5-7. (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2194133>)

At the other end, composite violent extremism does not cover violent actors who do not remotely demonstrate any ideological adherence, which meant that many mass shooters are excluded. The purpose of developing the overarching concept was to capture the apparent new paradigm of violent extremism that has clashed with existing categories used by scholars and practitioners, not to simply broaden the concept of violent extremism so much that it would encompass all mass killers with multiple non-ideological grievances or motivations. The concept is therefore deliberately described as composite violent extremism rather than composite violence.

Within this conception of composite violent extremism are three distinct categories based on levels of ideological discernibility and the centrality of beliefs to an individual's worldview. Rather than attempting to categorize based on *motive* — which can be especially difficult to discern for extremists swayed by multiple beliefs — the CoVE framework categorizes based on *expressed or exhibited* beliefs that *appear to influence* an individual's worldview and outlook. Many of the cases our team analyzed did not exhibit clear motives.

The categories of the typology are thus based on whether the individual expresses or exhibits easily discernible ideologies and the level to which expressed beliefs appear to be central to the individual's worldview. Inferences about how central the beliefs expressed by an individual are to their worldview depend on factors such as the extent to which an individual expresses the belief (e.g., posting about it online once versus repeatedly), whether the individual is connected to groups or movements sharing the belief, whether their chosen target aligns with the belief, and whether the individual self-identifies as an adherent of the belief. Though categorizing in this way still involves a significant amount of subjectivity, we assess this process as a clear and rigorous way to discuss cases with high levels of ambiguity that might otherwise be left under-examined and uncategorized.

One reason that a level of subjectivity invariably remains in play is that the concepts used to develop these categories are themselves contested. This is most evident with the concept of ideology itself, which is “infamous for its superfluity of meanings.”¹⁴ For the CoVE framework, *ideology* is defined as a set of beliefs that form a coherent outlook. This includes clearly defined and discernible ideologies (e.g., neo-Nazism, jihadism) or any prejudice (e.g., racism, extreme misogyny) that shapes a worldview or lifestyle. In some cases, a subculture interest (e.g., extreme violence, “Columbiners”) can function as an ideology when it rises to the level of fixation and clearly shapes an individual's behavioral patterns, worldview, and identity.¹⁵ This is an unconventional definition of ideology, aimed at highlighting the reality that there are traditional ideologies as well as functional ideologies.

The CoVE framework also relies on specific definitions for sentiments, prejudices, grievances, subcultures, and fixations, as these terms are central to the defining requirements of the four categories of composite violent extremism. A *sentiment* refers to an expressed prejudice, grievance, or subculture interest. A *prejudice* refers to a distinct negative opinion that is expressed toward some defined outgroup. A *grievance* refers to a real or imagined wrong or other cause for complaint or protest,

¹⁴ Jonathan Leader Maynard, “Ideology and Armed Conflict,” *Journal of Peace Research* 56, Volume 56, Issue 5, April 8, 2019, page 637. (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022343319826629>)

¹⁵ “Columbiners” refers to the subcultures that display an obsession with the 1999 Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado. Columbiners generally evince a fixation with shooters Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, expressing admiration for their actions and, at times, a desire to emulate them. See: Manny Fernandez, Julie Turkewitz, and Jess Bidgood, “For ‘Columbiners,’ School Shootings Have a Deadly Allure,” *The New York Times*, May 30, 2018. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/30/us/school-shootings-columbine.html>) *Functional ideologies* were only evident in roughly 10% of cases in the dataset.

especially unfair treatment. A *subculture* refers to a community, often online, centered around a particular aesthetic or shared interest at odds with accepted norms (e.g., glorification of mass violence, Satanism). And a *fixation* refers to an obsessive interest in or feeling about someone or something.

With these underlying definitions provided, I will now elaborate on the different types of composite violent extremism. As I noted earlier, the three categories are ambiguous, mixed, and fused. The ambiguous category applies to cases where the perpetrator does not exhibit an easily discernible ideology based on existing buckets (e.g., anti-government extremism), but rather an amalgamation of sentiments. The mixed category applies to persons who appear to hold multiple easily discernible ideologies, potentially alongside other sentiments. The fused category applies to persons who appear to hold a core ideology but also exhibit other sentiments that make the case difficult to neatly categorize using existing buckets.

Ambiguous

This category applies to violent extremists whose worldview does not appear to be influenced by any clearly discernible ideologies, but rather by an amalgamation of prejudices, grievances, and subcultures that may undergird various extremist ideologies (e.g., misogyny, racism, antisemitism, conspiracy theories, or mass violence). This includes individuals who express some level of support for an ideology (e.g., posting Nazi symbols) alongside other prejudices that make it difficult or impossible to discern a central belief system.

One example is an August 2022 attack in Bend, Oregon. Ethan Miller — who opened fire in a grocery store, killing two people before taking his own life — exhibited a range of racist and misogynistic prejudices alongside other extreme sentiments. His journal and social media exhibited racist terms (against white people, black people, Jews, Asians, and Latinos) and expressions of hatred for “EVERYONE & EVERYTHING.” Though Miller rejected being labeled an incel (involuntary celibate), his writings exhibited hatred and threats toward women and an unfulfilled desire for a partner common among incel communities. Miller also railed against the government, police, religion, and technology. He claimed inspiration from the 1999 Columbine school shooting.¹⁶ The dizzying array of sentiments expressed by Miller, which resembled multiple ideologies but never amounted to coherent expressions of these ideologies, places him in the ambiguous category.

Another example of composite violent extremism that fits within the ambiguous category is Nikolas Cruz. On February 14, 2018, Cruz carried out a shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in Parkland, Florida, killing 14 students and three staff.¹⁷ Cruz’s worldview appears to have been influenced by a blend of prejudices, including racism and antisemitism (he posted repeatedly about his hatred for black people, Jews, Latinos, and Asians), Nazism and white supremacy (he had swastikas carved into his gun magazines and content on his phone referencing the KKK), Satanism (his backpack and photos found on his cell phone depicted the Satanist reference “666”), and a general interest in mass violence.¹⁸ Cruz read extensively about acts of mass violence, including the 2016

¹⁶ “Oregon Safeway Shooter Claimed Inspiration from Columbine, Expressed Harsh Resentment Toward Women,” *SITE Intelligence Group*, August 29, 2022; Jessica McBride, “Ethan Miller, Bend Safeway Shooter: 5 Fast Facts You Need to Know,” *Heavy*, August 29, 2022. (<https://heavy.com/news/ethan-miller-bend-safeway-shooter>)

¹⁷ Paul Murphy, “Exclusive: Group Chat Messages Show School Shooter Obsessed with Race, Violence and Guns,” *CNN*, February 18, 2018. (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/16/us/exclusive-school-shooter-instagram-group>)

¹⁸ *Ibid.*; Law & Crime Network, *Twitter*, July 6, 2022.

(<https://twitter.com/LawCrimeNetwork/status/1544716552641122308>); Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety

jihadi shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, the 2014 incel killings in Isla Vista, the 2012 Aurora movie theater shooting, and the 1999 Columbine attack.¹⁹ The sum of Cruz's expressed sentiments does not point to a coherent ideology. Instead, his worldview appears to center around an amalgamation of prejudices and a general interest in violence.

Violent extremists who fit the ambiguous category can be identified by their expression (through their social media profiles, writings, and other sources) of an amalgamation of disparate prejudices, ideas, or grievances without a clearly discernible ideology. They often exhibit elements of an ideology but only inconsistently and interspersed with a variety of other beliefs or grievances, and their belief systems lack structure and consistency. Cruz, for example, lacked ideological consistency, piecing together disparate ideas — a determination supported by a court psychologist's later findings

Mixed

This category applies to violent extremists whose worldview appears to be influenced by multiple distinct and discernible ideologies alongside other prejudices, grievances, or subcultures. This includes individuals who adhere to multiple discernible ideologies or a combination of traditional and functional ideologies. Three individuals across three countries represent examples of the mixed category of composite violent extremism.

In April 2021, French authorities arrested 18-year-old Leila B. for plotting a terrorist attack targeting a church in Montpellier on Easter weekend.²⁰ During a search of her residence, authorities found material for constructing explosive devices and a journal filled with sketches of symbols associated with jihadism (e.g., a depiction of an ISIS member holding a decapitated head) and neo-Nazism (e.g., swastikas and depictions of Nazi soldiers), alongside other evidence that she was connected online with both ideological movements.²¹ She also exhibited a fixation on mass violence: She was obsessed

Commission, "Cruz Cell Phone Content and Internet Searches," *School Shooters.info*, November 8, 2018.

(<https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/Cruz-Cell-Phone-Content-and-Internet-Searches.pdf>)

¹⁹ Broward Sheriff's Office, "Case Supplemental Report," *School Shooters.info*, August 9, 2018.

(https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/Broward_Sheriffs_Office_Documents.pdf); Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission, "Cruz Cell Phone Content and Internet Searches," *School Shooters.info*, November 8, 2018. (<https://schoolshooters.info/sites/default/files/Cruz-Cell-Phone-Content-and-Internet-Searches.pdf>); Terry Spencer, "Parkland School Shooter's Swastika Carvings Are Focus of U.S. Court Fight," *The Times of Israel* (Israel), July 7, 2022. (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/parkland-school-shooters-swastika-carvings-are-focus-of-court-fight/>); Gregory Richter and Ariana Richter, "The Incel Killer and the Threat to the Campus Community," *Security Magazine*, March 12, 2019. (<https://www.securitymagazine.com/articles/89962-the-incel-killer-and-the-threat-to-the-campus-community>)

²⁰ "Suspect Arrested Over Easter Linked to French Church Plot," *Associated Press*, April 8, 2021.

(<https://apnews.com/article/arrests-terrorism-europe-france-02d562667268b2f0158df8714fe423eb>); Jérémie Pham-Lê, "'Je Voulais Mettre Cette Bombe dans l'Eglise': révélations sur L'Adolescente de Béziers qui Projetait un Attentat [I wanted to put this bomb in the church]: revelations about the teenager from Béziers who planned an attack]," *Le Parisien* (France), April 17, 2021. (<https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/je-voulais-mettre-cette-bombe-dans-leglise-revelations-sur-ladolescente-de-beziers-qui-projetait-un-attentat-17-04-2021-TH7TMLMZB5DXXBQHSK7V7PTD54.php>)

²¹ "Enquête pour 'Association de Malfaiteurs Terroriste' a Béziers : La Suspecte Mise en Examen et Écrouée [Investigation for 'terrorist criminal association' in Béziers: the suspect indicted and imprisoned]," *Le Monde* (France), April 8, 2021. (https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/04/08/enquete-pour-association-de-malfaiteurs-terroriste-a-beziers-des-elements-de-radicalisation-retrouves-chez-l-une-des-suspectes_6076012_3224.html); Pham-Lê, "'Je Voulais Mettre Cette Bombe dans l'Eglise,'" Ronan Folgoas and Jérémie Pham-Lê, "'Je Veux Faire Pire Que Columbine': le Projet de Tuerie de Masse d'un Adorateur d'Hitler Déjoué par la Dgsi [I want to do worse than Columbine]: the mass murder plan of a Hitler worshiper foiled by the DGSi]," *Le Parisien* (France), October 2, 2021. (<https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/je-veux-faire-pire-que-columbine-le-projet-de-tuerie-de-masse-dun-normand-adorateur-dhitler-dejoue-par-la-dgsi-02-10-2021-KPU1T7ZCGGV5HKN4PYGAUWFT5M.php>)

with gore, Columbine, and serial killers.²² Leila B.'s outlook appears to be based on a mix of ideologies blended with a general fixation on mass violence.

Andrea Cavalleri, arrested by Italian authorities in January 2021, also exhibited an interest in violent subcultures, writing about the “pleasure” he would feel carrying out a school shooting.²³ He was arrested for allegedly establishing and serving as the leader of a neo-Nazi organization “with the aim of recruiting volunteers and planning extreme and violent acts for subversive purposes ... inspired by the American supremacist group Atomwaffen Division and the Nazi Waffen-SS.”²⁴ Beyond his evident adherence to neo-Nazi beliefs, Cavalleri was also a self-declared incel and stated his desire to carry out an attack motivated by this identity. At one point he wrote to a friend: “We will be the first Italian incels to take action.”²⁵ Cavalleri's self-identification as an incel and his neo-Nazi ideology, along with attributing a desire to commit violence based on both, places him in the mixed category.

Finally, in October 2014, Zale Thompson attacked a group of NYPD officers with a hatchet, wounding two of them before being killed by police. The NYPD described the sentiments that Thompson expressed on social media as “anti-Western, anti-government, and in some cases anti-White,” and the FBI said he sought “inspiration from foreign terrorist sources like ISIS, but there is also evidence he was focused on black separatist ideology.”²⁶ Our analysis indicates that his outlook was influenced by two distinct and easily discernible ideologies: jihadism (he viewed extensive ISIS and al-Qaeda propaganda and posted on social media about jihadism) and black separatism (he had loose connections to black nationalist groups and advocated for black revolt).²⁷ Drawing heavily from these two ideological frameworks places him in the mixed category.

²² Pham-Lê, “Je Voulais Mettre Cette Bombe dans l'Eglise.”

²³ Paolo Frosina, “Il Delirio del Suprematista di Savona: ‘Hitler Come Cristo Guida Luce’. La Missione di una Guerra la Razziale ‘Contro Negri E Degenerati’ [The delirium of the supremacist from Savona: ‘Hitler as Christ guides light’. The mission of a racial war ‘against negroes and degenerates’],” *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (Italy), January 23, 2021. (<https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2021/01/23/il-delirio-del-suprematista-di-savona-hitler-come-cristo-guida-luce-la-missione-di-una-guerra-la-razziale-contro-negri-e-degenerati/6075257>)

²⁴ Ministry of the Interior of Italy, Polizia di Stato, Press Release, “Terrorismo: Arrestato 22enne Suprematista e Negazionista [Terrorism: 22-year-old arrested for supremacist propaganda],” January 22, 2021. (<https://www.italypress.com/terrorismo-arrestato-un-22enne-per-propaganda-suprematista>)

²⁵ Francesco Marone, “Black Sun: A Case of Radicalization Between Neo-Nazism and Incel Ideology,” *Italian Institute for International Political Studies* (Italy), January 27, 2021. (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/pubblicazione/black-sun-case-radicalization-between-neo-nazism-and-incel-ideology-29063>)

²⁶ “Transcript: Mayor de Blasio and Commissioner Bratton Provide an Update on the Assault of Two Police Officers,” *NYC.gov*, October 24, 2014. (<https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/897-14/transcript-mayor-de-blasio-commissioner-bratton-provide-update-the-assault-two-police>); Jonathan Dienst, “Hatchet Attack on NYPD Officers Was ‘Act of Terror’: FBI Director,” *NBC New York*, November 17, 2014. (<https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/hatchet-attack-nypd-officers-act-of-terror-fbi-director-james-comey/844450>)

²⁷ Alexandra Klausner, Kieran Corcoran, David Martosko, and Sophie Jane Evans, “Armed and Radicalized: Ranting ‘Self-Proclaimed Convert’ New York Hatchet Attacker was a ‘Terrorist’, Say Police,” *Daily Mail* (UK), October 24, 2014. (<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2806731/Was-terror-attack-Police-probe-extremist-links-online-rants-New-York-hatchet-attacker-emerge-shot-dead-attack-group-cops-Queens.html>); “Terror Connection Not Ruled Out in Hatchet Attack, Police Say,” *Fox News*, November 21, 2015. (<https://www.foxnews.com/us/terror-connection-not-ruled-out-in-hatchet-attack-police-say>); “Black Identity Extremists Likely Motivated to Target Law Enforcement Officers,” *FBI*, August 3, 2017. (<https://privacysos.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/FBI-BlackIdentityExtremists.pdf>); Michael Schwartz and William K. Rashbaum, “Attacker With Hatchet is Said to Have Grown Radical on His Own,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2014. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/25/nyregion/man-who-attacked-police-with-hatchet-ranted-about-us-officials->

Violent extremists in this category can be identified by their expressions of multiple distinct and easily discernible ideologies through their behaviors (e.g., school behavioral records or arrests), writings (e.g., social media posts, manifestos), or personal belongings (e.g., books, flags). Leila B.'s inclusion in mixed was primarily due to her behaviors and active communication with members of the Atomwaffen group as well as ISIS. Another marker that an individual fits this category includes an expressed desire to attack based on different beliefs, such as Cavalleri stating he would like to be an incel attacker while also planning violence with neo-Nazis. Unlike Cavalleri, Thompson did not explicitly self-identify with both ideologies that we attributed to him, but his social media profile and writings exhibited adherence to multiple distinct ideologies.

Fused

This category applies to violent extremists whose worldview is based on one clearly discernible ideology, but who appear to fuse this core ideology with other distinct prejudices or grievances. In cases that fit this category, there are clear indications of a core ideology but the presence of other sentiments complicates what might otherwise be clean bucketing (e.g., the individual's online footprint points to a single ideology but also contains references to other distinct sentiments).

In 2019, authorities in the United Kingdom arrested Jack Reed for planning a terrorist attack.²⁸ He reportedly wrote a manifesto with a list of targets to attack, including schools, pubs, council buildings, post offices, and a synagogue.²⁹ Reed fundamentally embraced neo-Nazi ideology. His journal contained Nazi symbols and admiration for Hitler and he initially came to authorities' attention when he expressed support for the British neo-Nazi group National Action.³⁰ However, Reed's core neo-Nazi outlook appeared to be infused with Satanism (he described his Satanic beliefs on an online forum, calling himself an "immoral individual," and also had references in his journal to the esoteric Satanist group Order of Nine Angles) and mass violence (he reportedly expressed admiration for murderers Ian Brady and Charles Manson, and repeatedly visited websites related to the Columbine attack).³¹ Though it is clear that Reed fits the neo-Nazi label, his interests in Satanism and mass violence complicate the picture — possibly explaining why some of the targets on his list did not appear to have connections to his neo-Nazi beliefs.

Scott Beierle carried out a November 2018 shooting at a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida, killing two women and injuring five before killing himself. The U.S. Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center used Beierle as a case study on misogynistic extremism, citing notes he left before the attack, his history of sexual harassment, and the content of the music he produced as evidence

[say.html](#)]; Priscilla DeGregory, Kevin Sheehan, and Kirstan Conley, "Black Panther Hails Ax Attack on Cops," *New York Post*, October 27, 2014. (<https://nypost.com/2014/10/27/new-black-panther-group-hails-ax-attacker>)

²⁸ Lizzie Dearden, "One of UK's Youngest Terror Plotters Named After Losing Anonymity Battle," *The Independent* (UK), January 11, 2021. (<https://www.the-independent.com/news/uk/crime/neo-nazi-terror-plot-durham-jack-reed-b1785650.html>)

²⁹ Faye Brown, "Terrifying Drawings Found in Bedroom of Neo-Nazi, 16, Convicted of Terrorism," *Metro* (UK), November 20, 2019. (<https://metro.co.uk/2019/11/20/terrifying-drawings-found-bedroom-neo-nazi-16-convicted-terrorism-11189596>)

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Daniel De Simone, "Durham Teen Neo-Nazi Became 'Living Dead,'" *BBC* (UK), November 22, 2019, (<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-tyne-50397477>); Brown, "Terrifying Drawings Found in Bedroom of Neo-Nazi."

that incel and misogynistic beliefs fueled his worldview.³² In other words, extreme misogyny was Beierle's core ideology, as it was fundamental to his identity and worldview. However, Beierle also exhibited racism and white supremacist prejudices. The National Threat Assessment Center reported that he "openly admired Hitler and Aryan Nations" and that "other members of online social networks referred to him as a Nazi." A few of Beierle's song lyrics and descriptions also reveal racist and white supremacist sentiments (one titled "To Arms!" calls for people to take up arms to defend the homeland from immigrants).³³ While Beierle exhibited extreme misogyny as a core ideology, categorizing him solely as such would be inaccurate.

Deciding whether a case of violent extremism fits within the fused category depends on whether the extremists demonstrate a primary fixation on one ideological framework or belief that dictates their behaviors, writings, or personal belongings while still exhibiting some level of adherence to other sentiments. The fused category, as opposed to ambiguous or mixed, is for individuals whose worldview is primarily centered around one idea. For Beierle, his history of sexual harassment, attack target selection, and lyrics evidenced that extreme misogyny was central to his worldview even though he also expressed racist sentiments. In the case of Reed, his writings and admiration for Nazism were clearly central but he nonetheless also exhibited some behavior, writing, or personal belongings that suggests an interest or less central belief in Satanism. This category primarily exists to allow for nuance in evaluating attackers who are more complex upon closer examination than they appear on the surface.

Toward Explanations of Composite Violent Extremism

The CoVE framework helps to both identify and disaggregate various acts of violent extremism that have challenged traditional categories in recent years. The apparently increased frequency of such incidents has gained attention from scholars and practitioners, prompting debate and the introduction of new policy frameworks in multiple countries. Why is this occurring?

The Information Environment and Online Space

I believe that the information environment and online space is critical and relevant to the present hearing. Much of the current literature on the phenomenon we are referring to as CoVE highlights the importance of the information environment. As Jakob Guhl, Moustafa Ayad, and Julia Ebner note, multiple ideological trends have been "converging into ideologically elastic online subcultures."³⁴ Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Brian Hughes argue that "material infrastructure enables the muddling of ideological rationales.... The infrastructure of digital communication technology, at both engineering

³² National Threat Assessment Center, "Hot Yoga Tallahassee: A Case Study of Misogynistic Extremism" (Washington: U.S. Secret Service, March 2021). (https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/reports/2022-03/NTAC%20Case%20Study%20-%20Hot%20Yoga%20Tallahassee_0.pdf)

³³ See, for example, Scott Beierle, "American Whore," archived November 4, 2018. (https://web.archive.org/web/20181104002705mp_/https://pathofdefiance.com/american-whore); Scott Beierle, "I'm Dreaming...", archived November 4, 2018. (https://web.archive.org/web/20181104002542mp_/https://pathofdefiance.com/4-i-m-dreaming); Scott Beierle, "American Burden," archived November 4, 2018. (https://web.archive.org/web/20181104001746mp_/https://pathofdefiance.com/8-american-burden); Scott Beierle, "To Arms!" archived November 4, 2018. (<https://web.archive.org/web/20181104000923/https://pathofdefiance.com/to-arms>)

³⁴ Jakob Guhl, Moustafa Ayad, and Julia Ebner, "From The Vicious Cycle To Ideological Convergence," *VoxPol* (Ireland), January 26, 2022. (<https://www.voxpol.eu/from-the-vicious-cycle-to-ideological-convergence>)

and design levels, makes motley ideological blends increasingly common.”³⁵ There is an intuitive logic to this, as today’s information environment — which broadly refers to the full spectrum of actors and systems that produce, share, and use information — is widely understood to play some role in reshaping people’s beliefs and behaviors. The information environment is particularly impacted by online spaces (e.g., the internet and social media), which are quickly becoming the primary means by which people communicate and consume information. A 2021 Pew Research survey revealed that 86% of American adults get their news from digital devices, about half of whom read their news on social media.³⁶ The CoVE cases in the dataset had extensive online footprints and social media activity (on platforms like Facebook and YouTube) related to their beliefs, but not necessarily to a greater degree than the general population.

Social psychology research indicates that social media enables individuals to strategically “connect with like-minded others and distance themselves from people with conflicting belief sets.”³⁷ This would suggest that social media tends to be a place where people confine themselves to narrow viewpoints, rather than being exposed to a range of beliefs. But it is also true that people consume information in the current information environment like drinking from a firehose. The proliferation of news sites, social media platforms, and other online information channels readily available to internet users makes it easier than ever to passively consume and be shaped by vast amounts of information from a multitude of online actors and communities simultaneously. Though someone might join a certain online channel intentionally — based on their preexisting interests and proclivities — that person might just as easily stumble upon a forum or thread that piques a new interest. In some cases, it is possible to observe in retrospect how the online space creates an environment where worldviews are formed in both intentional and haphazard ways that produce idiosyncratic beliefs.

Lindsay Souvannarath — who plotted with a co-conspirator in 2015 to carry out a shooting at a mall in Halifax, Canada — described her radicalization process in a podcast interview, noting that it happened “by chance” through online communities. By her own account, Souvannarath became a National Socialist after she joined an online art community and connected with an artist who happened to be a National Socialist. Through this relationship, she gained exposure to the broader neo-Nazi community and came to accept this belief system.³⁸ Similarly, she initially became obsessed with Columbine because of online research she conducted for a short story she was writing. She wanted the story to include a shooting, and her research exposed her to Columbine subcultures, where she built friendships and gained exposure to the writings of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.³⁹

These online influences culminated in an attack plan that exhibited elements of both Nazi ideology and a fixation with Columbine. Souvannarath and her co-conspirator, whom she met online, targeted a mall in “a protest against capitalism, against consumerism, against greed” in the vein of their National

³⁵ Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Brian Hughes, “Blurry Ideologies and Strange Coalitions: The Evolving Landscape of Domestic Extremism,” *Lawfare*, December 19, 2021. (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/blurry-ideologies-and-strange-coalitions-evolving-landscape-domestic-extremism>)

³⁶ Elisa Shearer, “More than Eight-In-Ten Americans Get News from Digital Devices,” *Pew Research*, January 12, 2021. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices>)

³⁷ Adrian Lüders, Alejandro Dinkelberg, and Michael Quayle, “Becoming ‘Us’ in Digital Spaces: How Online Users Creatively and Strategically Exploit Social Media Affordances to Build up Social Identity,” *Acta Psychologica*, Volume 228, August 2022. (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0001691822001585?via%3Dihub>)

³⁸ Jordan Bonaparte, Interview with Lindsay Souvannarath, “The Story of Lindsay Souvannarath - 2 - Life Before Choosing Death,” *Night Time*, February 7, 2019. (<https://www.nighttimepodcast.com/episodes/lindsay-souvannarath-2>)

³⁹ Ibid.

Socialist beliefs, and planned to end the attack “just like Columbine” by shooting themselves on the count of three.⁴⁰ Fortunately, the attack was thwarted by the Canadian Border Services Agency when Souvannarath attempted to cross from the United States into Canada to carry out the plot.⁴¹

Lindsay Souvannarath’s case highlights how individuals can be drawn into certain beliefs based on the networks and subcultures they choose to engage with online, but people can also be shaped by the information they consume exogenous to their own actions. The information environment — social media and news media in particular — is rife with information intentionally produced and disseminated to subtly influence people’s beliefs and behaviors without their knowledge. Foreign adversaries — both state and non-state — are known to manipulate the information environment to exacerbate and exploit political, ideological, and other divides in American society. Adversaries benefit from advancing any narrative that challenges the status quo while driving further polarization. This type of “hostile social manipulation” or “virtual societal warfare” may generally lend itself to individuals being influenced by an amalgamation of inputs and narratives designed to stoke chaos and a sense of urgency to act.⁴²

Violence & Nihilism

Individuals primarily oriented toward violence could be attaching themselves to a range of beliefs that provide ideological frameworks or justifications for violence. Indeed, many of the cases we observed exhibited distinct interests in mass violence. Many extremists in the dataset extensively glorified mass violence and mass attackers, most commonly Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold (perpetrators of the 1999 Columbine shooting), Elliot Rodger (perpetrator of 2014 Isla Vista shootings), Timothy McVeigh (perpetrator of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing), and Dylann Roof (perpetrator of the 2015 Charleston church shooting). At times, the relationship between an interest in violence and an ideology was symbiotic. Leila B., for example, told investigators that she adhered to jihadism and neo-Nazism to “justify” her “fascination with violent death.”⁴³ Still, this explanation raises further questions about whether and why individuals primarily oriented toward violence are a new or rising phenomenon, and whether this is novel to CoVE cases.

It is also possible that within the broader violent extremism ecosystem, violence and nihilism are becoming more central than ideology. Today’s violent extremists may be coalescing more around

⁴⁰ Jordan Bonaparte, Interview with Lindsay Souvannarath, “The Story of Lindsay Souvannarath - 3 - Lindsay, James, and the Valentine’s Day Massacre,” *Night Time*, February 15, 2019.

(<https://www.nighttimepodcast.com/episodes/lindsay-souvannarath-3>)

⁴¹ The Canadian Border Services Agency detained Souvannarath based on an anonymous tip and lack of return ticket and luggage. See: Mack Lamoureux, “The Woman Who Plotted a Valentine’s Mass Murder Shares How the Internet Radicalized Her,” *Vice*, February 21, 2019. (<https://www.vice.com/en/article/eve54j/the-woman-who-plotted-a-valentines-mass-murder-shares-how-the-internet-radicalized-her>)

⁴² Michael Mazarr, Abigail Casey, Alyssa Demus, Scott W. Harold, Luke J. Matthews, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and James Sladden, *Hostile Social Manipulation: Present Realities and Emerging Trends* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2019). (https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2713.html); Michael J. Mazarr, Ryan Bauer, Abigail Casey, Sarah Heintz, and Luke J. Matthews, *The Emerging Risk of Virtual Societal Warfare: Social Manipulation in a Changing Information Environment* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2019). (https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2714.html)

⁴³ Jérémie Pham-Lê, “‘Je Voulais Mettre Cette Bombe dans l’Eglise’ : Révélations sur l’Adolescente de Béziers qui Projetait un Attentat [‘I wanted to put this bomb in the church’: revelations about the teenager from Béziers who planned an attack],” *Le Parisien* (France), April 17, 2021, (<https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/je-voulais-mettre-cette-bombe-dans-leglise-revelations-sur-ladolescente-de-beziers-qui-projetait-un-attentat-17-04-2021-TH7TMLMZB5DXXBQHSK7V7PTD54.php>)

opposition to the current system by adopting any violent anti-status quo belief, and less around specific desired ideological outcomes. And, with the proliferation of existential threats and cynicism about the ability of any extant political system to deal with them, the reasons for the growth in nihilism are clear enough. From this vantage point, destroying the current system is of foremost importance, while determining what will replace it may be secondary or even irrelevant. Driven by a sense of urgency for change, violent extremists may be drawn to a range of belief systems that present perceived possibilities of success.

This explanation requires more study, but one case that illustrates the point is the Order of Nine Angles (O9A) and Ethan Melzer. O9A has a complex and often deliberately obscurantist belief system, but it can be understood as advocating for the destruction of Western society by any means necessary, encouraging adherents to bolster or even collaborate with movements like jihadism and neo-Nazism.⁴⁴ Melzer, a self-proclaimed O9A adherent, was involved in neo-Nazi channels online while plotting what he believed would be a jihadist attack against a U.S. military convoy in Turkey. He believed that this attack would draw the United States into another prolonged conflict and thus contribute to the collapse of the current U.S. political and social system. Further, a coalescence around nihilism and anti-status quo aesthetics could also explain why some factions of the white supremacist movement have adopted Satanism, which on its surface has little overlap with white supremacism.

Decentralization & Ideological Fragmentation

The online space is also contributing to the formation of decentralized extremist movements and networks, which may in turn decrease the ideological singularity and purity that comes with centralized command in an organized offline group.⁴⁵ In the context of ever-evolving online movements and subcultures, it could be increasingly difficult for groups to maintain control or influence over ideology. Again, this is apparent in the white supremacist movement, where groups like Atomwaffen and National Action became fractured over the adoption of subcultures like Satanism that spread through the movement online.⁴⁶

Google's tech incubator Jigsaw, which conducts research on issues related to violent extremism, touched on this move away from formal groups to decentralized online networks in the February 2021 issue of its magazine *The Current*. Based on interviews with former extremists, the magazine discusses how online networks enable individuals to join the white supremacist movement without exclusively adopting the ideology. Jigsaw theorizes that "the internet lowers barriers for those curious about a supremacist idea to anonymously learn about it, lurk in supremacist spaces online, and eventually interact with others as part of loose, informal networks." One result is that this "enables supremacists to pick and choose which aspects of supremacist ideology resonate and engage selectively with those

⁴⁴ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Emelie Chace-Donahue, "The Order of Nine Angles: Cosmology, Practice & Movement" (forthcoming in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*).

⁴⁵ Cynthia Miller-Idriss and Brian Hughes, "Blurry Ideologies and Strange Coalitions: The Evolving Landscape of Domestic Extremism," *Lawfare*, December 19, 2021. (<https://www.lawfareblog.com/blurry-ideologies-and-strange-coalitions-evolving-landscape-domestic-extremism>)

⁴⁶ Kelly Weill, "Satanism Drama is Tearing Apart the Murderous Neo-Nazi Group Atomwaffen," *The Daily Beast*, March 21, 2018, (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/satanism-drama-is-tearing-apart-the-murderous-neo-nazi-group-atomwaffen>); "Neo-Nazis Denounce Occultists Associated with Terror Plot, Favor Optics-Friendly Groups," *SITE Intelligence Group*, June 25, 2020; Lizzie Dearden, "Student Who Founded Neo-Nazi Terrorist Groups Convicted of Terror Offences," *The Independent* (UK), July 11, 2021. (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/andrew-dymock-srn-sonnenkrieg-nazi-b1864321.html>)

ideals... supremacists no longer have to find a group with which they fit; there is less friction to joining the distributed movement because they can retain idiosyncratic beliefs.”⁴⁷

Terrorism experts have also discussed the importance of this shift and its impact on ideology and beliefs. In July 2020, Colin Clarke and Bruce Hoffman wrote an analysis of the “next American terrorist,” emphasizing increasing decentralization and ideological fragmentation. Writing that “bureaucratic organizations with hierarchical leadership structures and clearly defined objectives have been supplanted by loosely networked movements with amorphous goals that exist across the ideological spectrum,” they suggest that “a confluence of ideological affinities is more powerful in inspiring and provoking violence than the hierarchical terrorist organizational structures of the past.”⁴⁸ Ideological fragmentation seems like a natural extension of this decentralization and may play some role in how individuals come to adopt composite beliefs.

Implications for Prevention

The rise of composite violent extremism (CoVE) presents a unique set of challenges for terrorism prevention efforts. Traditional counterterrorism strategies were largely designed to address violent extremism rooted in well-defined ideological movements. Prevention frameworks were built on the premise that extremist beliefs and pathways to radicalization followed a structured, identifiable trajectory. CoVE disrupts these assumptions.

Prevention efforts can be broadly categorized into **three levels**:

1. **Publicly Focused Initiatives:** Awareness campaigns, media literacy programs, and efforts to promote critical thinking and community resilience.
2. **Community-Based Approaches:** Collaboration with local leaders and organizations to monitor risk factors and conduct early interventions.
3. **Targeted Interventions:** Focused efforts on individuals at risk of carrying out violence, including deradicalization, mentorship programs, and law enforcement action.

While these categories remain useful, CoVE presents distinct challenges that require adaptation:

1. **Distinguishing Genuine Threats.** A core difficulty in countering CoVE is separating real threats from noise in an information space saturated with irony, trolling, and shock value content. Short-form media — including tweets, memes, TikToks, and YouTube shorts — has reshaped how extremists express their beliefs. While traditional extremists often articulate a coherent ideological framework, composite extremists may express disjointed and contradictory beliefs that nonetheless reinforce their intent to commit violence.

Practitioners must recognize that, despite their contradictions, composite violent extremists do have belief systems. Their worldviews, while fragmented, still have patterns, boundaries, and contours that

⁴⁷ “Global, Connected and Decentralized,” *The Current* 2 (2021). (<https://medium.com/jigsaw/global-connected-and-decentralized-41e496b44daf>)

⁴⁸ Bruce Hoffman, “The Next American Terrorist,” *Cipher Brief*, July 2, 2020. (<https://www.thecipherbrief.com/article/united-states/the-next-american-terrorist>)

can be analyzed. A critical challenge is determining when an individual's extreme expressions, even if incoherent, signal an intent to act. The failure to address this ambiguity can result in real threats being dismissed as unserious or performative.

2. Avoiding Counterproductive Engagement. Prevention measures could backfire if they trigger unexpected grievances hidden in the complex worldviews of people at risk of succumbing to composite violent extremists. In targeted interventions, this uncertainty makes selecting a credible intervener — someone seen as trustworthy, competent, or impartial — more complex than it is for traditional ideological terrorists.

In an age of polarization, institutional efforts to inoculate against extremism (e.g., messaging campaigns) can themselves provoke grievances. Similar issues crop up in direct communication with composite violent extremists, such as one-on-one interventions. Misrepresenting a composite worldview with an imprecise blanket term like “white supremacism” could potentially undermine the trust necessary for effective deradicalization. After all, one aspect of building trust in the deradicalization context is providing individuals with the confidence that important aspects of their former extremist worldview are understood by the intervenors with whom they interact. The potential for misunderstandings in this regard is even greater in the context of CoVE.

3. Tracking the Evolution of Fringe Beliefs. Many ideologies that today seem well-defined began as loose collections of grievances and subcultures. The incel (involuntary celibate) movement, for example, evolved from disparate online spaces into a structured belief system with its own terminology, grievances, and moral framework. Understanding when composite worldviews harden into new ideological movements is important for anticipating emerging threats.

Practitioners should track when composite violent extremists begin coalescing around shared narratives and self-reinforcing communities. While some CoVE cases may remain fragmented and individualized, others may lay the foundation for the next generation of extremist movements. Recognizing these patterns early is thus vital.

Fine-Tuning Prevention Strategies

The challenges presented by CoVE do not necessitate a wholesale reinvention of terrorism prevention. The existing toolkit remains valuable, but fine-tuning is necessary to account for the ideological fluidity, digital dynamics, and radicalization pathways unique to CoVE.

Prevention must remain adaptive, nuanced, and aware of the changing nature of extremism. Addressing composite violent extremism requires refining intervention strategies, ensuring that risk assessments account for ideological ambiguity, and enhancing efforts to track how radical beliefs take shape in the digital era. By doing so, we can build a more resilient system capable of identifying threats earlier, engaging at-risk individuals effectively, and preventing future attacks.