Gab and 8chan: Home to Terrorist Plots Hiding in Plain Sight

*The second in a series of reports co-authored by the Network Contagion Research Institute and ADL’s Center on Extremism*

New analysis of online behavior suggests similar ideological motivations and radicalization methods when comparing the perpetrators of the Pittsburgh and Christchurch massacres. Both killers announced in their preferred internet forums that they were about to commit violence and seemed to identify their fellow forum participants as community members who might share their propensity to commit violence. Both killers were consumed by the conspiracy of a “white genocide.” Both Gab and 8chan – the go-to forums for Robert Bowers and Brenton Tarrant, respectively – are rife with white supremacist, hateful, anti-Semitic bigotry.

We present here research conducted by NCRI director and ADL Center on Extremism research fellow, Joel Finkelstein, which provides the first in-depth examination of the genocidal language (e.g. “slaughter”) and conspiracy theories that are pervasive on both platforms. The research explores how each killer identified with his online community, with a degree of adherence reminiscent of what one might see from ISIS followers, and show how that same language is used constantly on both platforms, suggesting the next Bowers or the next Tarrant could emerge at any moment.

Background
On October 27, 2018, Robert Bowers perpetrated the deadliest attack against Jews in American history when he stormed a Pittsburgh synagogue armed with an assault rifle and three handguns. Shouting “All Jews must die,” Bowers killed eleven people in their place of worship. Within months, Brenton Tarrant perpetrated the deadliest attack against Muslims in New Zealand’s history when he slaughtered 50 people gathered for prayer at two mosques. In the wake of these horrific crimes, Jewish and Muslim communities worldwide and concerned citizens across the globe began searching for clues about attacks that seemed to come out of nowhere.

In hindsight, though, these killings should not have been surprising. Both attackers were enmeshed in online communities that exposed them to content designed to make them hateful and potentially violent. Bowers was a member of a fringe online community called Gab, which, like similar online forums, is a bastion of hatred and bigotry. Gab has seen a surge in racist and anti-Semitic postings since the 2016 presidential election. Tarrant, too, was part of a fringe online community called 8chan, one of the most notoriously hateful online communities on the internet.

Platforms like these force us to reassess our understanding of how violence may be inspired by such hateful echo chambers. Even more broadly, as we have recently reported, mainstream platforms can sometimes push such individuals from an open community, such as Twitter, into fringe environments like Gab that foster acceptability of dangerous views.

In September 2018, the Network Contagion Research Institute and its partners published a study, also detailed in a Washington Post article, which indicates that the state of online echo chambers of hate is far worse than many may imagine. Analyzing more than 100 million comments and tens of millions of images posted between July 2016 and January 2018 to Gab and 4chan’s “politically incorrect” message board (/pol/), the NCRI performed the largest quantitative study to date regarding the rise of anti-Semitism and white nationalism on these popular white
supremacist web communities. The study shows that anti-Semitic slurs and content doubled on these platforms after the election of President Donald Trump. During the same timeframe, these web communities also showed a dramatic surge in the expression of racism, including a substantial increase in the use of the n-word slur (see Fig 1.).
Fig 1. Use of racial terms and slurs over time on 4chan’s Political Incorrect message board (top) and Gab.ai (bottom), taken from hundreds of millions of comments in the course of over a year and a half of sampling.

In fact, anti-Semitism has reached such a fevered pitch within these web communities that the word “Jew” is essentially used interchangeably with slurs like “kike” and “(((jew))).” Set within triple parentheses, the now-familiar (((echo))) symbol began as an anti-Semitic signal of Jewish identity.
NCRI’s research also shows that these web communities influence the spread of hateful memes and images to more mainstream networks like Twitter and Reddit. This research (along with other studies) shows an uptick in hateful rhetoric on fringe web communities in the wake of significant political events or highly publicized extremist violence. Relatedly, some studies have similarly demonstrated that ethnic hate expressed on social media can cause surges in real-life hate crimes. The implications of this online-offline dynamic are highly concerning.

On Gab, Bowers demonstrated how online propaganda can feed acts of violent terror. On 8chan, Tarrant showed how violent terror can itself create online propaganda. In both cases, the shooters strongly signaled back to their fringe web communities with their criminal acts, as though they were including them as knowing co-conspirators. In both cases, the participation of these fringe web communities proves to be key to the scope, sensationalism, and ideological thrust of the act. Moreover, both shooters claim the same twisted notion of “white genocide”—or the imminent destruction of the white race by Jews and people of color—as the motive behind their terrorist acts, suggesting a shared ideological motivation. In fringe online communities, many members indoctrinate other users based on the conspiracy propaganda of a “white genocide” not online violent extremists of other ideologies spreading a grievance used to justify their malign views.

For Bowers, Genocidal Fantasies on Gab Inspired Real-World Violent Terror

In the case of the Pittsburgh shooting, Bowers demonstrated how a platform can transform fantasies of white-supremacist bigotry and hate into real-life murder. From the “white genocide” myth to associated anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about omnipotent Jewish control and the dangers of immigration, Bowers cited extremely popular themes – such as the “optics” debate – on these fringe platforms as his motive in a final post to Gab itself before the shooting:
We examined and decoded Bowers' language within the context of white supremacist terminology and revealed an underlying, communal, ideological hostility. Anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are central to Bowers' hateful rhetoric, and his mentions of “white genocide” – a propaganda term suggesting that the white race is “dying” due to growing non-white populations – are often paired with anti-Semitic conspiracy language. Research shows that believing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories most strongly predicts real and negative behavior toward Jews themselves.

Beyond Bowers' use of the term, we sought to understand how “white genocide” pairs with anti-Semitic tropes used by all Gab users. We deployed a machine-learning algorithm called “word2vec” that maps how strongly words associate with one another – i.e. how closely pairs of words are linked in context.

Analyzing all of Gab's approximately 36 million comments from August 2016 to January 2018 illustrated the relationships between terms related to #whitegenocide.

The words most strongly associated with #whitegenocide are visualized below, showing how connected they are to other terms (indicated by size) and their similarity (distance). The result shows the contexts in which the term “#whitegenocide” emerges within the Gab community (Figure 2).
The themes we found are displayed in Figure 2, which shows that #whitegenocide conversations on Gab depict “persecution” themes espoused by white supremacists and other racists. This includes #whitelivesmatter, #waronwhite and #itsoktobewhite. White nationalism (shown in blue) associates closely with
“white genocide.” Much of the Gab community perceives the would-be perpetrators of “white genocide” as “cultural marxists” (shown in green). These terms are closely linked to the “migrant crisis” (violet), and Jews (orange). Based on these diagrams, it becomes clear that white supremacists using Gab strongly perceive themselves as threatened by the Jewish community, and often spread dangerous conspiracy theories about how Jews and immigrants could bring about a “white genocide.”

When Bowers refers to #whitegenocide, his comments are closely associated with terms related to Jews (the orange cluster in Figure 3). Bowers’ final, three-line post before the Tree of Life shooting essentially utilizes three white supremacist rallying cries: Jews are responsible for immigration; immigration is destroying the white race; and public perception is less important than taking necessary actions to protect the white race.
The urgency of the call to genocide against Jews is unmistakable in Gab. In close proximity to references to #whitegenocide, Gab users include unfiltered enthusiasm for the murder of Jews, evident in references such as “hitlerwasright,” “tgsnt” (a reference to the pro-Hitler documentary “The Greatest Story Never Told”), as well as other cryptic terms like “gtkrwn,” which stands for “gas the kikes, race war now.” In other words, our algorithms show that, on Gab, #whitegenocide is often paired with explicit, genocidal sentiment towards Jews.

In Bowers’ case, Gab-fueled, unsubstantiated, perceived threat from Jews demonstrates the ways in which platforms can transform homicidal and genocidal fantasies into real-life mass murders. It is not impossible to imagine other Gab community members taking up the same cause.

For Tarrant, Real-World Violence Inspired Genocidal Propaganda on 8chan

Similar to Bowers, Brenton Tarrant, the alleged Christchurch gunman, announced his attacks in his preferred online community – for him, 8chan – before he committed them. His manifesto is completely continuous with the dark, troll-ish jokes of the most hateful of the community.

In his murder announcement, Tarrant actually jokes that he must “stop shitposting” in the community in order to post a "real life effort"; that is, a real life “shitpost”. He addressed his community on 8-chan directly as if they were co-conspirators and tasks them explicitly to “do your part” by furthering the next mass murder in the conspiracy.

Furthermore, he used the violence he perpetrated as an opportunity to call for the 8chan community to produce more murderous memes, which 8chan users reliably do. Finally, in his comments below (Figure 4) Tarrant identifies 8chan – more than any other platform he posts to – as his personal and reliable organization for incubating and spreading his violent ideology. Beyond the Bowers’ archetype, Tarrant did not subtly signal back to his community, but actively and publicly
sought to recruit them as co-conspirators and identified that recruitment as a goal in his violence.

Tarrant’s characterization of the 8chan community is illustrative of just how radical the platform is. To our knowledge, the following analysis by the ADL and the NCRI comprises the first evidence documenting the extent of radicalization on 8chan. The results are deeply troubling.

A frequency analysis of term use on the platform suggests that 8chan’s penchants for white supremacy, ethnic hatred and anti-Semitism are more pronounced, on average, than even 4chan’s or Gab’s (figure 5).

Fig 4. Tarrant’s post on 8chan about the murder show his extraordinary fluency with meme culture.
This data suggests that Tarrant’s faith in 8chan as a platform for spreading terror and propaganda is well-placed.

The fact that Tarrant, like Bowers, references white genocide as the motive behind his criminal act raises a troubling theory: that “white genocide” acts like a virus on these platforms. It instructs recognizable and organized features of apocalyptic, terrorist ideology, including explicit calls to act on that information. By disguising the debate as one of “optics,” the community obfuscates its genocidal intent as if it is a mere popular, political sentiment, but this practice pits one radical sub-community seeking near-term violence against another that seeks to hide its true intent until the race war fully erupts organically. These extremists hide behind what they openly call “free speech” but seem to know is simply a public relations campaign hiding violent intent. We designed a search to discover how “white genocide” was in fact being used in conversations on 8chan to radicalize.
The resulting graph in figure 6 shows an evolution of the term that is clearly more explicit, apocalyptic and hostile, relative to its milder equivalent on Gab. To begin with, “Muslim” “invasion” appears to neighbor “white” much more closely in 8chan than in Gab. This suggests that the notion of a Muslim invasion of the white race is more pressing, or at least more closely related in context, on 8chan than it is even on Gab. Another noticeable evolution is cryptic, genocidal terminology, which on 8chan is far more active: “slaughter,” “exterminate,” “annihilate,” “subjugate,” etc. This indicates that the matter is becoming urgent to the point of a perceived emergency on this platform.

In the top right corner of figure 6, in purple, shows a new script for “acceleration,” near the terms “race war” and “black pill,” a term used, initially by incels, to describe a total loss of faith in society, or someone who has essentially given up
trying to live within its constructs. The community advocates for accelerating the process that it perceives will result in the global chaos of an all-out, apocalyptic race war – presumably to include more violence like that of Bowers and Tarrant. The violent conspiratorial features of these belief systems are unmistakably radicalizing.

Preventing Violence Harbored Online

Gab and 8chan users bring violent, hateful ideology into comments about #whitegenocide and similar themes, by cloaking them in terms and references they know will only be understood within their communities. They depict Jews as murderous, all-powerful actors who seek to “racemix” white people out of existence. They depict Muslims and people of color as mindless enemy invaders threatening to replace white people and hasten the destruction of Western civilization.

The evidence overwhelmingly suggests that such platforms can serve to spread modern terror in ways that could not have been predicted from the early days of social media. Gab and 8chan fan the flames of bigotry and hatred and organize violent fantasies in online communities even as they fuel them in the real world.

There is no telling who else on Gab or 8chan may take cues from Bowers and Tarrant and act on the violent ideologies they derive from these online communities. In essence, these platforms serve as round-the-clock white supremacist rallies, amplifying and fulfilling their vitriolic fantasies.

1. Two such posts of Bowers’ are deeply offensive and anti-Semitic:

03-10-2018: “Another kike who pretends to be white only when it suits their need to push genocide against Whites. Jews are such heathenish creatures. Their extermination cannot come soon enough. And it will come as more and more sheep wake up to their true intentions and who (((they))) really are. The synagogue of satan [sic] and his slimy offspring will soon cease to exist.”
07-04-2018: "((Fellow White person))) reminds us #Goyim that #White people will be just fine. Just accept the #WhiteGenocide like a good #Goy. 

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkQkzcrk7ds"