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Investigating the Hate resulting from COVID-19

Remotely observing the Reopen movement as a pipeline into further radicalization

The Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights was founded in 1983 to investigate and combat racism and anti-semitism. It also set out to educate the public about the threat the far-right poses to the nation's democracy and well-being. The organization targets hate on a variety of fronts, from protecting American Indian sovereignty rights to fighting the Ku Klux Klan to exposing the racism motivating the Tea Party. They have also built trans-Atlantic relationships in order to track white nationalism at an international level. Their approach spans a variety of different methods and objectives, which is emphasized in their website's mission statement:

IREHR brings both a long-term perspective and a short-term urgency to our work. We aim to continue examining racist, anti-Semitic, and far right social movements, analyzing their intersection with civil society and social policy, and to educate the public and assist in the protection and extension of human rights through organization and informed mobilization.¹

The long-term perspective lies in both the decades they have spent combating white nationalism and the research archive they have constructed in the process, one of the largest research archives on the subject in the country. Their approach has been incremental and in-depth, investigating

¹ <https://www.irehr.org/2009/09/18/a-new-statement-by-a-renewed-organization-for-new-times/>

every possible corner of white nationalist activity, where they then fight against it and educate people, where they finally document it. When a new movement forms, IREHR is on top of it. This incremental approach has given them an incredible understanding of how white nationalism in America functions. Often it will be a variety of small-scale events and movements that eventually converge and affect the country. By studying and interacting with white nationalism for so long, and having such a deep understanding of its history, they are able to catch onto trends prevalent in American social movements quickly. Often, a social or political movement might not be overtly racist, but will have organizers and members across the hierarchy who espouse racist ideas. This can lead to members joining for the movement's stated ideals, but then getting further radicalized or feeling more confident in their racist beliefs, and if the group is big enough, a concurrent effect on policy and social relations. This is what they were able to spot in the Tea Party movement, which they discovered was motivated by racism, as the demographic of the movement had an above-average level of wealth. They found that their displeasure didn't seem to be based off of economic standing as they say, but rather white dispossession and a fear that white people are losing their spot in the social order. Their long-term perspective also comes from their database having documented information on players both big and small in white nationalist movements, which means that if they pop up again, in a movement like the Tea Party, they can publicize their history and jump into mainstream politics.

Their experience gives them a great advantage in noticing and addressing urgent issues, which is done through publishing articles, offering research to media organizations, and interacting with activist groups at a local scale. For example, their report on the Groyper movement was used in an article published by the Kansas City Star. This was a white nationalist movement that would attempt to move the ideologies of conservatives further into the right, and

radicalize people through creating a broader coalition among right leaning organizations. Their report made the students and faculty of Kansas State University aware of a new club formed at the school that was a part of the movement.

So interning for IREHR during both a global pandemic and national protests, there were a lot of possible research opportunities, given the radicalized politics resultings from it, and a whole lot of hatred rising to the spotlight. Ultimately, I ended up conducting my research among the reopen movement, and studying how, similar to the aforementioned Groyper movement, white nationalism was responding to the global pandemic and using the reopen movement as a possible pipeline to gain supporters and publicity. Given the political alignment of most reopen supporters, posts and commentary in reaction to the George Floyd protests would be widespread across the Facebook groups I joined that were said to be focused around reopening businesses and the economy. Conspiracy theories responding to both the pandemic and the protests, and the possible link between the two, would often be either explicitly racist and anti-semitic or imply hatred by playing into tropes. So by studying a movement without its origins directly in hate, I was able to watch the results of confusion, distrust and intent to indoctrinate on sparking further hatred and support.

My project

My project involved investigating, documenting, and eventually publishing an article about the REOPEN movement. This was mainly done on Facebook, under a fake account I created for the internship with the purpose of joining REOPEN groups. The original objective I was given was to go through a list of eight-hundred REOPEN groups that IREHR had in their database, join them, and document if they had a Facebook vaccine information warning that pops up in groups that spread false vaccine information. This was done with the purpose of seeing the

crossover between the REOPEN movement and the Antivax movement. IREHR has studied the Antivax movement before and published multiple articles about it and wanted to see if it was becoming a pipeline into the REOPEN movement/ to see what the crossover was. But as I joined more groups, it became increasingly apparent that the Facebook warning algorithm was lacking. Groups I would join would be overtly antivaccine and be spreading false information, such as Bill Gates supporting vaccines with the intent of microchipping us, yet not get the warning. After joining around four hundred groups, that project ended as I had only captured twenty warnings, proving that Facebook has little awareness of the content being posted. So we had to come up with a new assignment.

My second objective was again based on REOPEN groups on Facebook. This time, I would go through them and look through all of the posts going back to April. What I was looking for were posts that were related to political/social/ policy issues not related to COVID-19 and reopening the economy. This was to survey and document the radicalization of the REOPEN movement and to investigate its involvement with other groups such as Tea Party, Three Percenters, Proud Boys, militias and other conservative groups. It also allowed me to survey the variety of conspiracy theories prevalent in the movement, as well as the REOPEN movement's takes of the George Floyd protests which were occurring for the whole duration of my internship. My prior project had meant I was already in a large number of groups, which helped for the subsequent surveying of them. This was the bulk of my internship and informed my later article. The other interns and I would also have weekly check-ins with the organization's President Devin Burghart and one of its authors Chuck Tanner. During these I would tell them about the trends I was noticing and the types of post/theories that were popping up across groups.

Going through about the groups in-depth, I noticed many different trends and types of groups. The least notable of these types were very small local groups. Often, this would just be a community across a county. They would be full of people frustrated with the lockdown and how it was handled, and often out of work, but mention no outside social issues, conspiracy theories, or any overt showings of hate/radicalization. This type of group was the minority, but it is worth acknowledging that as it is an extremely decentralized movement, a minority of its supporters are not espousing racism, conspiracy theories, and sharing far-right political commentators. Going through this type of group was a really big learning experience, because it put in my mind the idea that some Americans aren't necessarily wrapped up in the ideological tendrils of the Reopen movement, but just out of work or not getting enough money to keep their business afloat, in a confusing time in counties with such low cases numbers that the virus is invisible. It didn't give credit to the reopen movement in my mind, but it did humanize them and give me a greater understanding of why some people were mad, and how the government was handling things poorly. One of the ideas we discussed in our weekly meetings were about the origins of hate and racism in America, and how it is often said to be the result of economic frustration, but the demographics of racist and far-right Americans is often relatively well-educated with above average income, pointing toward racism and hate in America being a deeper problem of white America feeling a loss of social standing as they see more successful Black people and as the country approaches a nonwhite majority. However, the reopen movement did not appear to have its origins in hate the same way the Tea Party does. Instead it seemed to originate from distrust of the government and medicine, similar to the anti-vaccine movements.

But, this distrust lends itself to conspiracy, which is where the Reopen movement shows itself as a possible pipeline into further radicalization. Another type of group that I would come

across often was one that only focused on Coronavirus, never getting off topic by mentioning the George Floyd protests or statues being taken down or any other popular talking points for the far-right this past summer, but would fall into conspiracy theories. The intensity of these types of groups went from more mild conspiracies about Coronavirus's origins and the government actions to overtly dangerous hate speech.

For example, one of the most shared posts was one that Facebook was on top of, in regard to fact-checking, which stated that US Hospitals are getting paid more to label cause of death as Coronavirus. The article itself wouldn't point toward any evil/diabolical source for this other than the government, but was regardless a popular strand of conspiracy. This type of conspiracy founded on distrust around death count, case count, and masks would often be relatively tame and not founded on hate. It would however often act as a pipeline, a point through which people are introduced to one side of the conspiracy and then quickly given a group or person to blame for it. These would go as far as stating that Coronavirus was invented so Bill Gates could insert microchips into people and give out lethal vaccines, that it was invented so Global Zionists could make money, to put our country in a state of turmoil thus opening up space for the protests, etc. The QANON conspiracy theory found its way into the mainstream during the spring and summer, and even had a conspiracy theory that the Coronavirus was a cover up used by the military during a nation wide child rescue mission. The threat from which they are being rescued: a pedophile kabbal that consists of elites.

Many of the groups shifted their focus to the George Floyd protests at the peak of its media coverage, going weeks without even mentioning Coronavirus except in conspiracy theories relating the two events. These posts revealed both the groups racism, as they would both disagree with the protests on a poorly-founded ideological basis, as well as the group's anti-

semitism, as George Soros was posited as the one behind the protests, funding the BLM and using his wealth to 'hire protestors.' George Soros conspiracies are inherently anti-semitic, as he has basically taken the role as a representative of Jewish people.

After conducting this research and starting to gain an understanding of the groups and their content, I decided to write an article about what I had seen. Originally, I intended on addressing Bill Gates and George Soro's respective roles as the metaphysical devil in Reopen and anti-protest conspiracies. Chuck Tanner and Devin Burghart at IREHR had sent me an article by Leonard Zeskind, the organization's former president, introducing me to the devil theory of conspiracy. This theory posits that the job of conspiracy is often to reduce a chaotic world into very understandable terms. It attempts to justify the problem of evil, which has been grappled with by Christian philosophers for centuries, through blaming it on a metaphysical devil, which has historically been directed at Jewish people in Western civilization. In the world of these conspiracies, things are stated in a way as if to say 'the world would be perfect and all-good if only...' and then lapse into blaming the evil on a plot by a group or organization. This corresponds to ancient and anti-Semitic versions of the devil. Now though, as being overtly racist is looked down upon by wider society and will likely not gain outside supporters, racist or anti-Semitic language is avoided, and hidden in some way, so it isn't explicit but is representative of a wider group. George Soros has played this role in antisemitic conspiracies for a while now. Because of this, I decided that addressing his role in the conspiracy theories revolving around the George Floyd protests wouldn't have been as informative or necessary to address as Bill Gates's role was, as it is well established that George Soros conspiracies are antisemitic.

So ultimately I wrote my article on Bill Gates and antisemitism, because I slowly started to notice that Bill Gates, who isn't Jewish, had become a major target of hatred in the reopen

movement, and often played into anti-semitic tropes. There is a nearly 200,000 person Facebook group named 'Collective Action Against Bill Gates. We Won't be Vaccinated!!' While the group stems from the Antivax movement, it is pulsing with antisemitic conspiracy; Zionists are constantly invoked as the cause of problems, as are the New World Order, many George Soros conspiracies are shared, and even David Duke videos attacking Jewish people. With antisemitic content so prevalent in a giant group revolved around the belief Bill Gates is an evil genius set on destroying the world, I figured there has to be a connection. And as I delved further and further through groups and conspiracy websites outside of Facebook, I realized that Bill Gates has the potential to become a George Soros type figure, where blaming him implies blaming Jewish people, but covertly. This is because the tropes of a global ruling class would often be present, and often put forth by commentators that espouse other anti-semitic beliefs, and most worryingly, the idea that Bill Gates is simply a puppet for this rich globalist elite, which to anti-semites, often is a "Global Zionist Ruling class." Beyond that, my article addressed the potential for the Reopen movement to radicalize people and carry them into more explicit forms of white nationalism, or to adopt further radical ideals. I ended up using my experience through researching to address a possible new current of anti-semitism I had yet to see addressed.

IREHR's understanding of hate

Upon joining IREHR, they sent me Leonard Zeskind's book *Blood and Politics*. The book was their introduction to their understanding of White Nationalism's recent history and how it functions. It began with the early twentieth century and followed two strands of White Nationalism; the Mainstreamers, whose goal is moving conservative politics further to the right, with William Carto's Liberty Lobby and the John Birch Society functioning as the ideological

engines, and the William Pierce, Vanguard strand, advocating for radical action (William Pierce wrote *The Turner Diaries*, which has inspired various hate crimes including the Oklahoma City bombing).

For the IREHR, there is the constant threat of hate infiltrating mainstream politics further and further, shown by Reagan in the past and Trump today, with Reagan's approach being a silent approval of white nationalism while Trump capitalizes on hate through his vitriolic speech. When high-ranking public officials either actively promote racism or passively ignore it, it sends a message to the public that it is acceptable. As mentioned before, the Tea Party is one of the most recent examples of racist ideology infiltrating the mainstream, though under the guise of decreasing government spending. Now, QANON, a movement that started as fringe conspiracy, has grown to the point of a few Congressional nominees supporting it and appearing on shows hosted by QANON commentators, with Donald Trump giving them a passive go-ahead.² Multiple QANON supporters have carried out violence in the movement's name. The REOPEN movement holds the similar potential of inspiring and promoting racism, as Facebook groups that were started up in response to the lockdown have devolved into political commentary groups, often featuring many far-right commentators such as Breitbart, Alex Jones, Candace Owens, Glenn Beck, and Roger Stone. Beyond this they also share racist posts responding to the George Floyd protests, the taking down of statues, and various conspiracy theories founded on racist and anti-semitic tropes. This means that Americans who already distrust the government and might align with the Antivax movement are being flooded with information that will further radicalize them and promote racism and anti-semitism.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/19/us/politics/trump-qanon-conspiracy-theories.html>

Then there is the vanguardist threat, which wasn't addressed as much in our meetings as we were usually going through larger, public Facebook groups. It was however brought up because militias have historically been an important faction in White Nationalist activity, and today are extremely active. The Boogaloo movement has been incredibly active recently, born on the internet, fueled by conspiracy theories and racism, and present in anti-lockdown protests and in response to the George Floyd protests. Multiple security officers and law enforcement officers have been attacked by the Boogaloo boys, who used the protests as a cover, which had the dual effect of being used by the right to promote sympathy for the police, detracting from the necessary police reform being called for by protestors.

The organization finds that the origin of hate is not in the constantly cited economic frustration, that hate isn't the act of channeling frustration with one's own circumstances out into another group, but rather a cultural issue. White Americans do not experience economic downturn and suddenly become racist. Periods of decreased economic stress don't suddenly resolve issues of racism. The narrative that racism's origins lie here excuses the cultural history of racism and antisemitism in America. And it's a narrative that I had believed before the internship, it always made sense and growing up in a city, it's easy to believe the trope put forth in the media of poor white racist Americans, so it checks out. But instead, IREHR puts forth that all of this results from white dispossession. The feeling that white Americans are losing their dominant social standing, that no longer being the racial majority is one thing, but losing political and social dominance is the real issue to them. This spurs movements like the Tea Party, with members angered by their country being led by a Black president. The Proud Boys have a similar fear, but specifically in regards to White American men's standing, as they are angry at the increased social standing women are beginning to have in this country. Distrust of the

government, which often results from being a disgruntled citizen, does play a role in promoting hatred. But it is often because the same politicians and speakers playing off this style of populism also focus on racism and stereotypes. Distrust of the government can act as a pipeline into racism and hatred, which is deeply ingrained in White America's culture and psyche. But never is it a result of frustration and economic stress. The spread of hate is the inflammation of what is already there. And in order to combat it, America's understanding of race and social order must change. Observing much of America's reaction to the handling of Coronavirus and the George Floyd protests, I got an intimate look into how Americans are dealing with the confusion, chaos, and economic stress. Through both my meetings and personal experience looking through the Facebook groups, I realized that moments of history like this do not create hate. People are definitely frustrated, and ready to go onto Facebook and complain. But it is through going onto Facebook and being exposed to conspiracies and racism that people begin to feel like certain behaviors and beliefs are okay. And this is why America is at a critical point right now, especially after the country is reopened and finds a semblance of normality.