

The End of the Beginning: IREHR and the Ongoing Fight Against White Nationalism

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Over the course of the 20th century, the growing presence of white nationalism has become increasingly prevalent, especially in America. What was once a radical belief has been mainstreamed and normalized among the general public, spreading and mobilizing people to act on bigoted belief systems. Out of this, the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (IREHR) was created. For 9 weeks over the summer of 2023, I had the privilege of interning with IREHR. As an anthropology major, I came to this opportunity not only looking to understand IREHR as an institution, but also the culture and ideologies that attract susceptible people to white nationalist ideologies. Through IREHR's scholarship and my own research, I came to better understand not only the nature of white nationalism, but also multiple ways to fight it.

Background

IREHR was created in 1983 and has since been headed by founder Leonard Zeskind. Zeskind started as a labor activist, organizing and attending protests before pivoting to journalism and scholarship. His magnum opus, *Blood and Politics*, was published in 2009 and serves as an encyclopedic account of the white nationalist movement's rise in the past 50 years. More specifically, it incorporates Zeskind's field work, journalism, research, and interpretation of court documents to describe the rises of key white nationalist figures like David Duke, Willis Carto, and William Pierce. Through this, Zeskind not only details the spectrum of white nationalism, but also the sub-movements' fights for power. *Blood and Politics* argues that historical shifts such as the Cold War and the Civil Rights Movement incrementally created equal rights for people of color and non-Christians, and as a response, those who benefited from this disproportionate amount of power for so long did anything they could to secure it. Hence white

nationalism, which spanned from discreet racism and antisemitism to an explicit call for a whites-only nation, both of which are a form of genocide nearly always executed through means of political control.

During my nine weeks of this remote internship, my specific task was to research and track the Gen-Z, white nationalist streamer Nick Fuentes. Specifically, I saved a copy of Fuentes's almost daily livestreams, took notes on key points such as alliances/rifts, plans for his followers, and potentially incriminating evidence. With these, I would then screen record and extract particularly notable and/or incriminating clips of Fuentes. All this content was uploaded to IREHR's digital database. Clips that I extracted were particularly useful for short-form journalism, which IREHR posted on their Twitter to quickly inform social media users of Fuentes and his dangerous ideologies. With several weeks of research under my belt, I then worked with Laura Gibbons to co-write an article on Fuentes's most recent July rally. This 8-page article combined months of shared data to inform readers of Fuentes's increasingly vocal antisemitism, genetic determinism, sexism, and general bigotry. Each week was also supplemented by a one-on-one meeting with Chuck Tanner, who I presented my research to and which he gave me relevant context, guidance, and interpretation for further research. Additionally, I had the opportunity to attend a weekly staff meeting with Laura Gibbons, Chuck Tanner, Devin Burghart, and Leonard Zeskind.

With social media, tracking the far right seems like a Herculean task. Devin explained to me during my first week that IREHR creates specific projects to manage this. While Devin testified at the Ammon Bundy/People's Rights Network trial and Chuck researched Sam Bushman/the League of the South, I was assigned to focus on Nick Fuentes. Through this

research and collaboration with IREHR's staff, I became acquainted with Nick Fuentes's growing "Groyper" movement, which has been a vocal far-right community since the 2016 election cycle. In 2017, Fuentes dropped out of Boston University after his freshman year due to death threats for his far-right political views. Since then, he has also been permanently banned from Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, among most other mainstream platforms. He is most notable for being pictured at a November 2022 dinner with Ye (formally Kanye West) and former President Donald Trump in Trump's Mar-a-Lago property. To spread his content, Fuentes created Cozy.Tv, an online streaming program that was exclusively for Fuentes and other far-right content creators such as Alex Jones to livestream on. Fuentes's show, America First, livestreams nightly on Monday-Friday, often from 90 minutes to 4 hours. The show itself consists of Fuentes's commentary on current news, which he usually retells events in a way that supports his antisemitic ideals. The latter part of the show consists of fans sending Fuentes "superchats," or cash donations attached with a message for him to read and respond to on the livestream. These donations ranged anywhere from \$3 to \$5000.

Summer 2023 consisted of Fuentes' organization of Fuentes Rally II, which was held on July 16th in West Palm Beach, Florida. Although the event was organized in merely 3 weeks, the event gave Fuentes exposure to a much wider audience. He collaborated with other social media personalities such as Sneako, LeafyisHere, and most notably, the Fresh & Fit Podcast. Fuentes appeared on multiple episodes of the Fresh & Fit Podcast, one of which became the podcast's most viewed episode on Rumble, a website that markets itself as a free-speech streaming platform. This episode, which was also on YouTube, was instrumental in Fuentes's notoriety, as it was a way for Fuentes to secondhandedly access a more mainstream platform.

Fuentes's Rally itself was a much smaller turnout than he had alleged, with photos from the event suggesting that there were a mere 144 people in attendance compared to the 500 people Fuentes had boasted. Despite the controversy surrounding the event, it allowed Fuentes to gain much more traction due to his collaborations and gave him an opportunity to formally call for a "Holy War" among his followers. This supposed "Holy War" was a call to action to preserve Catholic values, fighting the "evils" of Talmudic Judaism. Although Fuentes frequently references Catholic ideologies, he is almost never transparent with his sources or inspirations. In Fuentes's view, academia and the media are under Jewish control, so they are not regarded as valid resources. With this research, I contributed to IREHR's article "Nick Fuentes and Christian White Nationalist 'Holy War,'" posted on August 11, 2023.¹

Conceptions of "Hatred"

Preciseness of language and terminology is essential for IREHR. Whether it is accurately keeping records, avoiding libel lawsuits, or framing their information for audiences, every staff member is conscientious and particular about word choices and their implications. A more controversial choice of words is not using the word "hate." "Hate is an emotion," Leonard Zeskind said in several of the staff meetings. He feels that this term oversimplifies the issue at play here. Additionally, this oversimplification can create artificial divides, or exacerbate preexisting ones, since the audience's interpretation is also something word choice strongly depends upon. IREHR recognizes the concept of hate but feels that the word "hate" itself is inadequate and misleading. A singular emotion does not organize people into hate groups and ideologies, so IREHR prefers to use more expansive terminology.

¹ <https://www.irehr.org/2023/08/11/nick-fuentes-and-christian-white-nationalist-holy-war/>

On my first day of orientation, Devin told me that IREHR was a “data-driven organization.” IREHR prides itself in their data collection, which means they curate factual-based appeals, not emotional based ones. Instead, IREHR uses the precise words that reflect the type of discrimination and/or organization such as antisemitism, homophobia, racism, white nationalism, vanguardism, etc. This is especially crucial, as the white nationalist movement has skewed the meanings of several words. For example, the term “populist,” which started as the 1890s People’s Party improving working conditions of laborers has been claimed and rebranded by figures like Donald Trump who push anti-establishment, anti-government ideologies, often coinciding with general bigotry.

To curate data, IREHR first thoroughly collects content through a combination of old-fashioned field work and online research. For especially crucial events, IREHR may find someone to attend undercover and report back to them. One of the staff may also attend themselves if they event is local to them. Online means include extensive notetaking, timestamps, and dates to easily retrieve and organize data. Posts and videos are also duplicated and saved. This is especially important for livestreams and other content that is online temporarily. Then, this content and its corresponding notes are uploaded to IREHR’s cloud (or what Devin refers to as the “blob”). In IREHR’s Kansas City headquarters, there is an expansive physical archive that spans back decades. Now, with so much of far-right activists organizing online, there is also a large electronic archive. IREHR’s staff is also split between Missouri and Washington state, so this format allows for communication and sharing between IREHR’s staff across the country. In fact, the ultimate goal is to transfer all of IREHR’s physical archived materials to an electronic format to make it more readily available and easier to maintain.

IREHR strongly emphasizes the quality and thoroughness of their research. To call anyone a white nationalist is a large, potentially career-ending accusation, so IREHR labors to assure that all information is as accurate as possible. IREHR uses source quotes and primary documents that they have archived recently or years prior if necessary. They are also thorough with the information that they record, only saving content directly posted by the streamers and activists themselves, and not accounts who repost this content. Devin warned that this is especially crucial in the age of deepfakes and AI, so IREHR tries to avoid this as much as possible.

With these encyclopedic source materials, IREHR takes care to cite any claims they make throughout their publications, adding in-text footnotes and a bibliography with links to all sources used. This transparency of data is crucial, as there are skeptics and instigators. For example, Chuck Tanner had been conducting and publishing research on activist Sam Bushman and his League of the South. In response, Bushman directly emailed IREHR, accusing the organization of making false statements about him and requested a lunch meeting with Chuck himself to amend these accusations. Despite regularly receiving requests like this, IREHR does not agree to any offers for meetings with activists to be convinced of their innocence. Instead, they alert anyone who disagrees with the information published that IREHR is happy to revise false information, which is an offer that these activists have almost never responded to.

Approach and Strategies

As their name suggests, one of IREHR's main methods of fighting bigotry is through informative scholarship. Their website is full of articles, both long form and short form, that center on various far-right topics or activists. While some pieces are 60 pages of extensive

research on movements such as the Groyppers, IREHR has made a conscious effort in recent months to shift to more short form content. Ahead of the 2024 election cycle, they want algorithms to boost their reach as much as possible, so they are active on Twitter daily and have started producing much more pieces of shorter duration. Images and short video clips are also friendly for this method, as they are sharable media that can even appeal to those that may not want to read an article.

One of the most effective direct courses of action that IREHR has taken is through legal protection. Over the course of Summer 2023, Devin Burghart used IREHR's extensive research to testify as a key witness in the People's Rights Network/Ammon Bundy trial, which gave IREHR a new wind of exposure and interest. Chuck Tanner also told me about individualized legal help, as in the case of a Mennonite woman who IREHR assisted. While her husband became increasingly active in a white nationalist group, she was trapped within the Mennonite community and her marriage, so IREHR was contacted to help her navigate the litigation and transition away from the community.

IREHR not only tracks data qualitatively, but also quantitatively. For example, they quantify "activists" within groups. Activists are defined as members who have a regular engagement with a group, whether that is following social media pages, attending rallies, recruiting new members, etc. Chuck told me that IREHR defines many of their terms using the ADL's official glossary, which has extensive definitions of terms and symbols that mobilize white nationalists and other bigots. While "activist" itself is a neutral term, in IREHR's case the term usually carries a negative connotation, as it describes white-nationalists and neo-Nazis. According to the ADL, an activist is "someone who gets involved in activities that are meant to

achieve political or social change; this also includes being a member of an organization which is working on change. ² With this, activists can express themselves in a plethora of ways. IREHR records that 875 out of about 7000 state legislators are part of far-right Facebook groups, showing not only how widespread these ideologies have become, but also how they can directly affect litigation.

IREHR provides a nuanced view of these activists, recognizing that anyone can fall into far right or white nationalist ideologies. Chuck highlighted that despite their harmful beliefs, white nationalist groups create a sense of community and identity that attracts people. White nationalists are still human, and remembering this is key to disassembling them. In simple terms, if people are convinced that a certain group is threatening them, then they will do anything to fight that and maintain their position and/supremacy. What most would refer to as a “hate group,” IREHR sees people motivated and influenced by white nationalist ideologies. These white nationalist “lenses” warp the way that those affected by them see the world, and therefore motivate them to act upon those beliefs. This is where IREHR intervenes: They work through organizing and educating.

In terms of organizing, Chuck Tanner says the rule of thumb is to “defend your turf.” If a specific area is being targeted by white nationalists, then IREHR tries to work from the inside out. It assures those within these communities that they can defend themselves and fight back, especially since these messages may be more powerful coming directly within a community and not someone from IREHR. At the same time, encouraging those within targeted communities to speak up not only is more impactful interpersonally, but it also allows IREHR to be sensitive to

² <https://www.adl.org/resources/tools-and-strategies/education-glossary-terms>

tensions and issues within these communities, showing support without intrusion. With the core logic of white nationalism being genocide, it is important to act promptly. Chuck says, “Never give an inch to any of these people [white nationalists] if you can.”

In terms of educating, IREHR takes a multifaceted approach. They inform people who are more likely to counterprotest against white nationalist movements, encouraging them to organize and take action. IREHR also seeks to inform susceptible people. For example, this would mean informing Nick Fuentes followers who do not consider themselves Nazis of the striking similarities to Fuentes’ and Hitler’s ideologies, including Fuentes’s idolization of Hitler. When writing my piece on Fuentes, Chuck stressed the continuous connections that I needed to make between the two figures. It is easy for people to distance themselves from history and not see white nationalism as the threat that it is. In addition to these pieces, IREHR educates more broadly using the media, whether this is through social media, the press, or events.

More specifically, IREHR targets what they find to be the most susceptible populations: average Americans who are politically moderate or slightly right, as these people are the most likely to be swayed even farther right. This is especially crucial in the age of Facebook misinformation, as election denial and Covid denial can introduce people to white nationalist movements before further radicalizing them down this pipeline. Similarly, Leonard Zeskind spoke of the Middle American Radicals, a term coined by sociologist Donald I. Warren, and how the 1992 Pat Buchanan campaign transformed this group into the Middle American Nationalists. Similarly, the 2016 Donald Trump campaign organized and radicalized right-centrists further right on the political spectrum.

One example of a successful resolution prompted by IREHR occurred with Mark Reynolds. Reynolds, a rampant homophobe and anti-LGBT activist, lived in Washington state. IREHR flooded Reynold's community with articles about his beliefs and bigotry. He was then shunned and target so severely that he relocated to Tennessee. As a result of these efforts, Reynolds keeps a relatively low profile. While not all activists and their followings are this easy to disassemble, IREHR makes a true effort like this to prevent Reynolds and similar ideologies from gaining traction.

Through these methods, IREHR ultimately wants to equip average citizens with the tools to accurately interpret media and/or political movements. IREHR also offers workshops and guest lectures to quickly inform people of their conceptualizations of bigotry and what to watch out for. For example, Leonard Zeskind was a keynote speaker at a recent Zoom webinar "Resisting White Supremacist Violence." Here, he spoke for an hour about his past experience, present methodology, and future philosophy regarding the white nationalist movement, admitting that this is a battle he will die fighting.

Because IREHR focuses many resources and articles on the dynamics between far-right activists, they are frequently accused of platforming their beliefs and drama. This includes passive aggressive Tweets, arguments over livestream, memes made by activists' followers, etc. I admit that I ran into this dilemma firsthand writing my Fuentes piece. I was consuming about an average of 3 hours of Fuentes's media daily, and I was obviously uncomfortable hearing his antisemitic rants, among others. It felt like I was indirectly supporting Fuentes by consuming and tracking all his content. There were even comments on IREHR social media posts accusing them of platforming these influencers. I asked Chuck how he navigates this, to which he replied,

“framing.” It is a delicate balance, but ultimately it is more about educating than redirecting attention to these white nationalists. IREHR does take precautions such as blurring out white nationalists’ contact information or social media to not direct more foot traffic their way. If readers are curious, then IREHR has all the source materials that they use linked in their article footnotes. The key role of IREHR is to inform audiences not only of the dangers of white nationalism and bigotry, but by doing this, equip them with the skills to be self-sufficient, not falling prey to these ideologies while encouraging others to do the same.

Conclusion

In a recent speech, Leonard Zeskind quoted Winston Churchill, saying, “Now this is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.” While this was said in a 1942 Churchill speech after a recent British victory, Zeskind compared this to the fight against white nationalism. If there are only 30 years before whites become the minority in America, then that means that these white nationalists will fight for whatever they can take for at *least* that long. Despite small victories, there is still a long road ahead of fighting white nationalism.

Through this internship with IREHR, I have had the invaluable opportunity to pair new and preexisting understandings of the white nationalist movement. From my own experience, I have witnessed the rapid political mobilization that occurred from the 2016 presidential election onward. Through IREHR, I have seen how these far-right movements have further pushed people to join movements such as the Groyper. The importance of precise language, thoroughness of research, and proactive approach have enabled me to better understand white nationalism and how to fight it. Although my research was concentrated on one activist of the

far-right movement, the process of accumulating data and curating it into easily sharable content could easily be used for numerous other pressing social issues. Despite the growing presence of white nationalism and bigotry, working with IREHR has fostered a newfound optimism for a reversing these ideologies.