Phishing for Nazis: Conspiracies, Anonymous Communications and White Supremacy Networks on the Dark Web.

By Lev Topor.
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Lev Topor's *Phishing for Nazis: Conspiracies, Anonymous Communications and White Supremacy Networks on the Dark Web* takes the reader inside the world of the dark web on a hunt for white supremacists and neo-Nazis. Referred to in research as 'undercover cyberethnography', Topor's approach is that of a participant observer, following and interacting with the threads of conversations and referrals as they spin a web that draws the curious ever deeper down a path that can lead to radicalisation and violent extremism. From these observations, he draws conclusions about individuals and communities. He observes their ideologies and narratives, how they interact, who they influence, how far their reach extends.

The book presents both evidence and resulting observations, opening a window to this secretive world where white supremacists and neo-Nazis interact with each other openly and globally, under a cloak provided by the technology of the dark web. The work goes beyond this region of the internet, showing the role of platforms like Telegram, Gab, and Discord that operate not on the dark web but on the open internet as part of this communication ecosystem. The private groups examined on these platforms required a registered account and a referral or invitation from others in the community.

In his introduction, Topor criticises those policymakers who regard cyber threats as less dangerous than real-world threats and treat them as a marginal issue:

> Their argument is based on the fact that the majority of online content cannot harm, injure, or kill others. Yet, as presented throughout this book, I disagree. Words can indeed lead to actions. Hate in the online domain does indeed turn into real-world hate, taking the form of harassment such as doxxing or violent terror such as shooting sprees. (3)

This phenomenon is very clear in Australia where, despite the work of the Online Hate Prevention Institute and other organisations documenting and highlighting the spread of online hate and extremism, the eSafety Commissioner's powers have been limited to cyberbullying of individuals. There is no power to act on hate targeting entire communities or promoting dangerous ideologies like white supremacy or neo-Nazism, at least not until after an attack when the focus shifts to preventing the spread of videos of livestreamed violence or terrorist manifestos. *Phishing for Nazis* provides a basis of evidence for a shift in focus by government agencies, once that has started within the intelligence community, and a need to fund and support the civil society initiatives that contribute to monitoring these threats.

The book discusses the methodology of undercover cyberethnography and one particular ethical approach to this work, that of observing what is said without investigating the speakers. While this approach protects the privacy of the individuals observed, it raises other ethical questions about a researcher's obligation to society, and at what point ethics might demand that content be shared with authorities to prevent catastrophic harm.

Topor is also critical of efforts by governments and social media platforms to force extremists off large social media platforms, saying this worsens problems of racism (7). He is similarly critical of efforts to ban Holocaust denial, saying: 'the illegality of certain manifestations such as Holocaust denial is, in fact, almost useless by now' (7). These arguments ignore the benefit of setting boundaries on what is acceptable and what is not in society, and the even greater harm that can occur when hate is allowed to be normalised. The discussion serves as a counterpoint to the Australian experience, where the public display of Nazi symbols has only recently been banned following a series of very public displays by neo-Nazi groups.

An effort is made early to provide readers with the technical background to understand the technologies discussed later in the book. Unfortunately, the explanation is at times more technical than is needed for the discussion in the remainder. In other places, there are simplifications, e.g., confusing the internet and the web (27), or errors in describing the technology, e.g., asserting Telegram group chats have self-destruct timers (32)—a feature only available in non-group Secret Chats. Readers should persevere past chapter 2 and engage with the real value in the remainder of this book: its focus on online white supremacy and neo-Nazism.

Topor presents white supremacy as the 'single idea common to the vast majority of far-right movements in Europe, the United States, Australia, and even Russia' (45). He highlights how white supremacist neo-Nazism has had a growing mainstream impact on society, including in politics. This has been achieved through anonymous global communications used to create segregated online communities where hate is normalised. Topor explains how white supremacy encompasses older elements of antisemitism and racism, and also opposition to the values of a modern liberal society.

In explaining white supremacist ideology, Topor introduces the relatively recent concept of racism, which developed from ideas that began to emerge in the fifteenth century and crystalised into the scientific racism of the nineteenth century. He explains the role of racism as a justification for slavery and colonialism, and outlines the far older roots of antisemitism, including opposition to the Jewish people's religion and culture, conspiracy theories and scapegoating. Topor also highlights the significant roles of the particularly

Russian and former Soviet concept of racism, arguing that understanding it is essential to an understanding of the global spread of white supremacy today. Today's white supremacy, Topor argues, is largely based on the conspiracy theories and scapegoating of antisemitism, but is now also applied to Black people, Asian people, Muslims, immigrants, and others.

Five justifications for white supremacy are presented: (1) religious superiority; (2) racial/biological superiority; (3) cultural superiority; (4) protectionism often presented as a response to 'White genocide' (a conspiracy theory promoted by adherents to this ideology); and (5) freedom, particularly freedom of speech. Topor suggests that the first three arguments, the ideas of cultural, biological, and religious superiority, have merged within white supremacy. This superiority argument, the protectionist argument, and the freedom argument are also explored.

The book provides case studies from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia. It gives a brief history of racism, and notes a few key historic events related to racism and antisemitism in each of these countries. While the histories are different, each event led to a rise in white supremacy, which is presented as a response to local developments. Topor shows how the narrative of a need to defend White people from others who are presented as dangerous, and to protect White people's position, is a common thread despite the differing historical starting positions. He concludes that 'the problem is not the glorification of one race but the vilification of other races and religions' (62).

A deep dive into Holocaust denial on the dark web and Telegram gives the reader a strong insight into the nature of the content shared and sold among neo-Nazis. The content ranges from banter through to reading lists, books, and multimedia content from well-known figures who purport to be serious scholars as they promote their denial. Some content, or directions on how to purchase it, is reproduced as a workaround to technological or legal bans that may prevent some users from accessing the material on the open web. Other content is primarily distributed within these online communities. Topor shares responses from users, including channel administrators, who were ready to assist and evangelise their ideology. The content on these encrypted and anonymous platforms is not coded but overt—those who have been imprisoned for Holocaust denial are worshipped. Quotes from Holocaust scholars are reframed and misrepresented to add credence to the claims of the deniers.

A second deep dive looks at antisemitism. It includes an examination of 264 items of content from across 26 far-right communities and explores the type of messages—from sharing references to open calls for action—and how often they are against different communities, e.g., Jews, Black people, Asians, Muslims, etc. The data shows that across the six types of messages, Jews were the most frequent target in every case and by a significant margin. Over all, Jews were targeted more than three times as often as Black people, the next most frequently targeted group. The data also shows that the dominant form of message was that of conspiracy theories, followed by calls to action. This empirical evidence again highlights the central nature of antisemitism in white supremacy and Nazi ideology. It is a valuable contribution.

A series of case studies looks at antisemitic incidents within the channels examined. Of particular interest to Australian readers will be the case study on doxxing. Topor writes, 'Having been exposed to many doxxing posts over the years, I can only conclude that antisemitic and racist doxxing should be regarded as incitement to violence.' Those doxxed in Australia when the Jewish Artists and Creatives WhatsApp group was targeted in early 2024 will no doubt agree. In one case study, a Jewish woman and her family, presented both as very wealthy and as employees of an organisation tackling racism, had personal details shared among white supremacists. Another case study shows a dark web user from Canada outlining their 'solution' to social problems, which includes limiting legal rights to White people, killing or sterilising Jews, and genetic testing to identify White people who are not 'pure' after which their rights would be revoked.

In a chapter on violent extremism, Topor considers the link between online radicalisation and real-world violence. He focuses on the attacks on the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh (27 October 2018), the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch (15 March 2019), the Poway Synagogue (27 April 2019), and the Tops Friendly Markets supermarket in Buffalo (14 May 2022). Having myself both researched and responded in real time to all of these attacks, I find Topor's argument of the role of the dark web and private platforms as an essential path to radicalisation (123) overstated. Much of the radicalisation in these cases is documented as having occurred on the open web on platforms like Gab and 8chan. This said, the contents of the dark web can certainly contribute to radicalisation and likely at an intensity found in few places on the surface web. As Topor later notes, it is anonymous communications, rather than private communications, which have been the key to radicalisation in these lone wolf attacks (124).

Topor provides some useful policy recommendations for tackling violent extremism, the end point of the hate and radicalisation discussed throughout the book. His recommendations are well worth the consideration of key stakeholders including government officials:

> Social networks need to restrict their "sacred cow"—unconditional freedom of speech; however, such restrictions must be overseen by local and even international regimes, as social media platforms are often overly focused on reach, influence, and profit. Governments need to shift their focus and resources to the online domain, and the traditional press must restrict ISIS-like videography or photography even if this makes their stories less desirable. (135)

Phishing for Nazis takes the reader on a tour of some of the less accessible places where white supremacy and neo-Nazism fester. It is at times repetitive, but also shows an evolution of thinking as the book progresses. Early on, it defends the role of anonymous platforms in protecting dissidents, and champions the importance of free speech. By the end of the book, Topor stresses how all platforms operate within the bounds of nation states and urges that 'countries, whether on their own or as a group, must use their full powers in the online domain to help make it less anonymous, at least in prominent cases where radicalising propaganda is being disseminated' (148).

While coming from an American perspective, the book touches on many topics of particular interest to Australian readers, particularly those addressing the topics of antisemitism and Holocaust denial. In addition to exploring online neo-Nazi and white supremacist activity, it provides short and useful summaries on antisemitism, key incidents, and the people involved. Its focus is the here and now. Those working in tangential spaces like Jewish Studies, or students seeking an overview of the topic, will find *Phishing for Nazis* a useful entry point.