BOOK REVIEW:
GOING DARK: THE SECRET
SOCIAL LIVES OF EXTREMISTS

Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists, Julia Ebner, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, 292 pages.NZ Price $33.00

Julia Ebner is a journalist and research fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in the United Kingdom. Her expertise in online networking and communications methods of right-wing extremism informs a number of advisory groups, governments, NATO, the UN and the World Bank and has also resulted in several publications to date. This thought-provoking book titled 'Going Dark' is Ebner's latest release and highlights key social and technological drivers behind modern-day political activism, radicalisation and terrorism online and is written in a style that is both compelling and easy to follow. As such it is equally accessible to passively interested readers as well as researchers and those employed in cyber security and counterterrorism.

'Going Dark' is an empirical account of contemporary online extremist groups, seen as both dynamic and innovative in offering appealing countercultures that leverage powerful psycho-socio hooks such as hierarchy, populism, groupism and gamification to recruit and retain socially vulnerable, unsuspecting or simply curious viewers. In taking advantage of a growing appetite for social change by today's younger, educated and more politically astute generations, these online groups are altering the nature, and our understanding of radicalisation and terrorism according to the author. More perturbing is that Ebner links these "toxic online cultures" (p238) with real-world lone-wolf attacks including that of the Christchurch Mosque shooting in 2019.

From a New Zealand perspective, Ebner's account and critical insights into the Christchurch attack in 2019 offers an informative window into the nuances and complexities involved in the nexus between right-wing conservatism and users online. Moreover, based on her accumulated experiences of these groups, Ebner provides remarkable rationale for why and how online violence so easily manifests into tragic real-world realities. Her observation that the live streamed attacks of the Mosques were conducted primarily to gain popularity, praise and respect from online gamers and the trolling community for example, acts as a warning to users, owners and protectors of social media sites that online violence spilling over into real-world attacks cannot not be underestimated or overlooked.

Despite the somewhat vigilante ethnographic approach to obtaining information for this book, the author's findings into how online right-wing groups function and what makes them popular is invaluable. Joining a women's anti-feminist group, Ebner sees firsthand how effective emotional manipulation can be in forging a sense of belonging and purpose and how this can manifest in gender specific ways when she witnesses a strong desire for a return to traditional gendered roles and open support for misogyny, verbal abuse and domestic violence. Another example in this book highlights Ebner's critique of the lack of targeted censorship by major online social media companies such as Twitter where alignment of right-wing groups with elected political parties in Europe translates into conservatist leaning online election campaign promotions.

The concluding chapters cover a range of predictions and potential solutions based on Ebner's findings. Of note for the New Zealand government following the Christchurch attack is that reactive policy is ineffective where manipulative, intimidatory and radicalist social dynamics are at play in digital extremist groups. She predicts future threats taking the form of on-, and offline hybrid terrorist attacks (p234) and in anticipation of this, implores the reader to find ways of countering these online right-wing extremist groups in similarly innovative, intuitive and human-centric ways because technology and online social connections have become too intertwined to separate and tackle in isolation.

A key critique of this book however, is that her focus is primarily on far-right extremist online activity with limited coverage of equivalent activities being carried out by the anti-fascist far-left groups such as *Antifa*. A recent report by *The Intercept* outlines the growing polarisation and spill over into violence between mainstream right and left-wing groups in the US which was becoming increasingly politicised as the 2020 elections drew closer.[1] These tensions are not restricted to the US however. Given the powerful global reach of online networks discussed by Ebner, a more balanced and less biased approach considering both would be useful.

In short, 'Going Dark' is a must-read for those interested in the topic of online extremism because of its capacity to critically evaluate relatively unknown territory. Ebner reveals a volatile yet invisible space, a paradox where human vulnerability meets highly influential and malevolent social networks. Her candid and informative approach throughout this book underlines the extent of contemporary online violence which, due to its global reach and manipulative ideology is affecting a strong sense of inclusivity, community and ideological 'buy in' with real-world consequences.

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[1]   Devereaux, Ryan. (2020). TRUMP'S TURN FROM IMMIGRATION TO THE ENEMY WITHIN. Retrieved from https://theintercept.com/2020/10/03/trump-immigration-antifa-fascism/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=The%20Intercept%20Newsletter (8 Oct 2020).