

# Malevolent Creativity: An Analysis of Far-Left Extremist Online Communiques

Laramie Sproles, MA Student  
School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

## I. Project Description

### 1. Project Background and Rational

Violent extremism is a complex problem that continues to pose a threat in the United States and abroad. One particular type of violent extremism that has been relatively understudied is far-left extremism. The outcomes of this proposed study will add to the limited body of literature on far-left extremism by analyzing the products of its violence for indices of malevolent creativity. This research provides a valuable opportunity to analyze a unique dataset to determine whether far-left extremist groups generate creatively destructive solutions to problems they perceive warrant violent action (e.g., stopping logging and animal testing) and how those solutions vary depending on the target of their actions. This research will also create a baseline of malevolent creativity that can be compared to far-right and Islamic jihad extremist group attack profiles. Additionally, this study will significantly contribute to the ongoing research related to violent extremism at UNO's Center for Collaboration Science.

Violent extremism can be defined as violence committed by an individual or group in support of a religious, political, or social issue and is typically equated with terrorism (Borum, 2011). There are three main types of violent extremism: Islamic Jihad, Far-Right, and Far-Left (Chermak & Gruenewald, 2015). In the last few decades, violent extremism has received increased attention among academics in a variety of fields (Edwards & Gribbon, 2013; Horgan, 2008; Ligon, Harris, & Harms, 2014; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Sageman, 2004; Simi & Futrell, 2010). Despite this increased interest, far-left extremism remains relatively understudied. Research on far-left extremist groups is especially relevant because, according to the Deputy Assistant Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), one of the most serious domestic terrorist threats come from special interest extremist groups such as the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) and Earth Liberation Front (ELF) (Lewis, 2005). For the current study, far-left extremism will be defined as a web of clandestine groups that subscribe to one or more of the following ideas: support for bio-centric diversity, the belief that the earth and animals are in imminent danger, and the view that the government and other parts of society are responsible for this danger and incapable or unwilling to fix the crisis and preserve the wilderness (Chermak, Freilich, Duran, & Parkin, 2013, p. 6).

Specifically, in the domain of far-left violence, the proposed project will examine varying levels and characteristics of malevolent creativity. While creativity is typically associated with positive outcomes such as a beautiful painting or an innovative marketing design, it can also be utilized to bring about darker and more destructive ends. Malevolent creativity refers to the use of creativity to achieve a negative or harmful goal or product (Cropley, 2016). According to Cropley and Cropley (2013), it is particularly important to research the creativity in violent extremism because the same qualities that strengthen the solution (e.g., novelty, effectiveness, elegance, and genesis) also characterize violent ideological acts such as innovation in bomb techniques. Violent extremism often involves the application of cunning and ingenuity, the development of new methods or techniques, and the generation of surprising results (Cropley & Cropley, 2013). Therefore, it is important to both recognize and understand malevolent creativity and the role it plays in violent extremism. It is especially important to analyze far-left extremism given statements from the FBI that categorize these groups as a significant threat (Lewis, 2005). While the connection between malevolent creativity and violent extremism is beginning to receive more attention (Cropley, Kaugman, & Cropley 2008; Cropley & Cropley, 2013; Gill, Horgan, Hunter, & Cushenbery, 2013; Cropley, 2016), this study would be the first of its kind to analyze malevolent creativity in far-left extremist groups.

### 2. The Product of the Funded Activity and Its Contribution to my Masters Studies

After the completion of this study, I intend to submit one or more academic papers to peer-reviewed journals in the fields of criminology and criminal justice, social problems, and terrorism studies. Additionally, I intend to present my completed project at the annual meeting of the American Society of Criminology in November of 2018. I believe this research project will have important theoretical and practical implications and will provide the basis for

future comparative research. The most beneficial outcome of this study is the experiences and skills I will acquire, both qualitatively and quantitatively, throughout the study. I look forward to undertaking this project because such work will lay the foundation for my master's thesis.

### 3. Research Methodology and Activities to be Undertaken

The primary function of this study is to answer the following research questions: 1) what types of targets do far-left extremists go after, and 2) what are the degrees of variability in creativity across different target types? Creativity research typically focuses on the 4Ps of creativity: process, product, people, and press (Cropley & Cropley, 2013). This study focuses on the product of far-left extremism or the act of violence itself. To analyze far-left extremism for its ability to produce malevolently creative products, the proposed study relies on an analysis of communiques collected from *biteback.com*, an ALF affiliated website. These communiques contain information on attacks committed by far-left extremists on the behalf of their ideology and thus contain information on its product. Due to the nature of this type of extremism, many incidents remain unreported to the police or, when reported, are not identified as acts of violent extremism. Analyzing the communiques, a primary data source from the extremist group itself, will allow me to overcome under-reporting of far-left attacks in secondary sources.

The *biteback.com* communiques were collected during the summer of 2017 at the UNO's Center for Collaboration Science using a web-crawler to automate collection. Web-crawling, also referred to as domain spidering, starts with a set of seed URLs and relies on an automatic webpage collection program to harvest webpages linked for the seed URLs (Chen et al., 2008). Using this technique allowed for a comprehensive data collection from a known set of URLs associated with the ALF. This yielded a sample of 2,795 communiques dated from 2003 to 2017 from a variety of far-left extremist groups from around the globe, including the ALF, ELF, Stop Huntington Animal Cruelty (SHAC), and the Animal Rights Militia. This data was collected with a FUSE grant awarded to Eric Perez, a computer science major supervised by Drs. Gina Ligon and Doug Derrick in The Center for Collaboration Science. Since the data for the purposed project is already collected and available, the first step is to create a content coding scheme to guide the analysis of the data. The communiques will be evaluated for general characteristics, such as target type and attack type, as well as specific indices of malevolent creativity, such as novelty and elegance. The coding scheme will be developed with the same practices used in psychometric test development. Behaviorally anchored benchmark scales (BARS) of objective markers will be developed based on the sample to provide coders with anchors of complex features and performance. The majority of the constructs will be measured using a five-point Likert scale.

After a codebook is created, all of the communiques will be evaluated according to the content coding scheme. To minimize mono-method bias, I will utilize two teams of coders that evaluate each communique for different information. Each team will consist of two main coders and one senior coder. Each coder will undergo training in the theory underlying violent extremist organizations and malevolent creativity, as well as best practices in historiometric coding and developing shared mental models about each construct to be coded. I will provide this training, a codebook, and written protocol for the coders to follow. To insure a shared mental model among the members of each team, the coders will independently code the same communiques before meeting to discuss their ratings. This will allow them to discuss any discrepancies in their codes and reach a better understanding of each construct. Before meeting, I will calculate interrater reliability and agreement based on their individual responses. Once interrater reliability is calculated to be 0.90 or above, coders from each team will begin coding on their own. I will periodically check to ensure that interrater reliability remains consistent throughout the coding process.

After the communiques are coded using the content coding scheme, the next step will be to analyze the data. Malevolent creativity will be measured by three variables: effectiveness, novelty, and elegance. By definition, a creative product must be both effective and novel (Cropley & Cropley, 2013). The presence of the additional construct, elegance, will increase the level of creativity of the product. This will allow for the comparison of different levels of malevolent creativity among different target types. To examine target types (e.g., national critical infrastructure related to food versus education) varying levels of creativity, I will run descriptive statistics, correlations, and on-way ANOVAs (analysis of variance) among the target types to determine the extent malevolent

creativity varies across targets (e.g., hardened versus soft targets). Based on the existing literature on malevolent creativity and violent extremist groups, I have two broad propositions:

1) Infrastructure in line with the Far-Left ideology (e.g., property associated with medical research, food production, and chemical research) will be targeted more often than non-ideological congruent targets (e.g., transportation infrastructure).

2) Infrastructure types that have had more frequent attacks will be rated as more malevolently creative in later years, as expertise in these attacks increases over time.

#### 4. Timeline of Project

<b>Tentative Research Schedule</b>	
<b>May 2018</b>	Create codebook. Begin coding communiques.
<b>June 2018</b>	Finish coding communiques. Write literature review and theoretical framework sections.
<b>July &amp; August 2018</b>	Analyze the data. Run descriptive statistics, correlations, and between target ANOVAs. Write methods section. Begin writing results and conclusions sections.
<b>September 2018</b>	Finish writing results and conclusions sections.
<b>November 2018</b>	Findings will be presented at the American Society of Criminology conference. Incorporate feedback from the ASC conference.
<b>Spring 2019</b>	Findings will be presented at the 2019 Research and Creative Activity Fair (RCAF). Submit finished article to a peer-reviewed journal.

#### 5. Description of the Roles of Student and Faculty Mentor

My faculty mentor for this research project is Dr. Gina Ligon. It will be my responsibility to develop a detailed research design, develop a codebook, organize and supervise the coding process, analyze the results, and write the subsequent article. Once the project begins, Dr. Ligon will provide assistance throughout the coding process and statistical analyses when necessary. Most importantly, Dr. Ligon will assist me through the process of writing and submitting the article for publication. While I am responsible for developing the final product, Dr. Ligon will be available for assistance throughout the entire project.

#### 5. Previous Internal Funding

I was previously awarded a FUSE grant in 2017. The proposed project is similar to my FUSE project in that both examine malevolent creativity in violent extremist groups; however, they differ significantly in study population and methodology. The goal of the previous study was to examine individual differences in creativity and aggression between violent ideologues and violent non-ideologues. I compared a sample of violent ideologues comprised of former members of neo-Nazi groups to violent non-ideologues made up of a comparison sample of former members of Mixed-Marshall Arts (MMA) groups. The comparison sample allowed me to isolate ideological violence from non-ideological violence to a certain degree, as well as examine the personality correlates of each. I hypothesized that the former neo-Nazis would have more creative solutions when posed with an experimental scenario that confronts their prior ideology. The findings suggest, while former neo-Nazis have more experience dealing with the types of problems presented in the study, their prior connection to a neo-Nazi group constrains their solutions to those typically used by far-right extremist groups (e.g., the use of propaganda to bring attention to the problem). This project helped shape my interest in malevolent creativity and apply it to a new domain: the Far-Left.

## II. References

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### III. Budget

I am requesting a student stipend of \$5,000 to cover my living expenses while completing this project. The stipend will be used as a graduate student salary over the summer months. As a funded graduate student, I am fortunate to receive financial compensation during the spring and fall semesters. However, this funding does not extend into the summer months. This stipend will cover my living expenses throughout the summer semester while I focus on the proposed research project. I predict the majority of my time will be spent coding and interpreting the data. Therefore, if funded, I plan to dedicate 30 to 40 hours per week on this project for a total of 14 weeks. This results in a pay rate of \$10.00 per hour.

<b>2018-2019 Budget Justification</b>			
<b>Budget Item</b>	<b>Timeline</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Justification and Amount</b>
Personnel	May 2018	Create codebook. Begin coding communiques.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Partial stipend for living expenses.</li> <li>- Work 30 hours per week at \$10 per hour for 3 weeks.</li> <li>- Stipend amount: \$900</li> </ul>
	June 2018	Finish coding communiques. Write literature review and theoretical framework sections.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stipend for living expenses.</li> <li>- Work 40 hours per week at \$10 per hour for 4 weeks.</li> <li>- Stipend amount: \$1,600</li> </ul>
	July 2018	Begin analyzing the data. Write methods section.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stipend for living expenses.</li> <li>- Work 40 hours per week at \$10 per hour for 4 weeks.</li> <li>- Stipend amount: \$1,600</li> </ul>
	August 2018	Finish analyzing the data. Start writing results and conclusions sections.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Partial stipend for living expenses:</li> <li>- Work 30 hours per week at \$10 per hour for 3 weeks.</li> <li>- Stipend amount: \$900</li> </ul>
			<b>Total Budget: \$5,000</b>

Selection Committee  
GRACA Award  
Regarding **Laramie Sproles**

Dear GRACA Selection Committee:

I am writing on behalf of Laramie Sproles, a student who is applying for a GRACA for Summer and Fall of 2018. I have come to know Laramie this last year through her work in our research lab. Last fall, she volunteered to familiarize herself with our projects on violent extremist organizations, and last semester she won a spot on a federally-funded grant from the Department of Homeland Security to examine individual characteristics of violent extremists. From this work, she has identified a unique problem and asked me to supervise her independent research to execute it. I will use the remaining sections of this letter to describe the importance of her research question, the resources she has and needs to execute it, and how her project adds value to our federally-funded grant on far-left groups.

Laramie, who works with Pete Simi, Steven Windisch, and myself to understand how malevolent creativity is seen in a laboratory setting in a sample of former Neo Nazis, is an impressive student. After showing her the types of data we collected last summer through an NRI grant to examine Neo Nazis as they compare to other types of violent individuals, she developed a curiosity about what she could do to move the research forward. She began researching malevolent creativity and sought ways to codify the participants' responses from an experiment they completed while in our applied research laboratory. It was through this work she diligently developed her own expertise in how creativity might manifest in other groups. She is currently a graduate assistant on a project for Homeland Security examining far-left group organization and leadership. In this role, she has become interested in the Animal and Earth Liberation Front groups, particularly.

Laramie has many of the resources need to execute this work. Laramie works 20 hours a week in our interdisciplinary lab (The Center for Collaboration Science) where students are posed with challenging questions that require multiple disciplines to execute. One of the most pressing issues around violent extremist groups is to understand how they conduct attacks in ways that are above and beyond what typical violent groups execute. Because of this, Laramie asked if she could use an existing dataset developed by Eric Perez on his FUSE last year to examine varying levels of malevolent creativity. Laramie has volunteered on other students' FUSE and GRACA projects, and she will have access to an interdisciplinary lab to help her code the communiques and analyze her results. Funding her GRACA will allow her to lead this project.

Finally, Laramie is a hard worker in our Center for Collaboration Science lab. She has already volunteered on a set of projects where she assesses the destructiveness of a given terrorist attack using validated scales of malevolent innovation. I have reports from other students that she is eager and hardworking, attending lab meetings and diligently consuming training material given. In short, Laramie is intellectually curious, motivated, and hardworking - precisely the type of student that GRACA is meant to fund. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,  
Gina Scott Ligon, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor of Management  
College of Business Administration  
Mammel Hall, 303e  
gligon@unomaha.edu

