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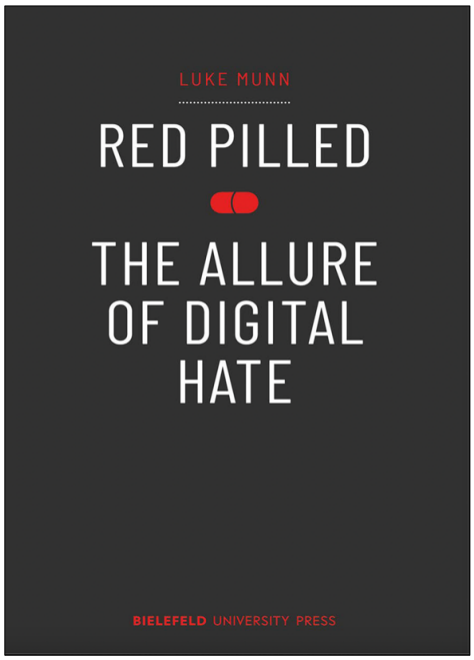
Luke Munn, **Red Pilled: The Allure of Digital Hate**, Bielefeld, Germany: Bielefeld University Press, 2023, 204 pp., $55.55 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Neelam Sharma
Idaho State University



Red Pilled: The Allure of Digital Hate is a compelling read by Luke Munn in which he tackles a complicated question of what digital hate is, how it spreads, and what we can meaningfully do to minimize its risks.

Munn does not present any grand theory that can explain the spread of digital hate in our contemporary mediated society. He, however, relies on four case studies to explain the sociocognitive processes that aid people in becoming (and trusting) the discourse on closely knit online communities or "echo chambers." Munn explores digital hate at the intersection of individuals, digital space, and the community. Munn, after conducting an exploratory analysis of how individuals become a part of radicalized online communities, suggests that online radicalization stems from individuals' need to belong to a community. Thus, deradicalization, suggests Munn, also must start from the same space—reconnecting with people, especially family and friends.

At the heart of this book is a simple assertion that hate is not anything new; it is fundamental to human nature, and it has existed throughout human history. People have always been dehumanizing the "other" (examples of antisemitism, misogyny, racial discrimination, gender-based discrimination galore in human history). Thus, the present-day hate on digital platforms should not be construed as something new or something unheard of. Munn notes:

> Our present moment, despite its claims to novelty and technological acceleration, does not emerge from nothing, but is continuous with what has come before it. To understand contemporary hate, we need to grasp where it came from and why certain modes of dehumanization (unfortunately) keep returning. (p. 20)

Thus, Munn asserts that online groups emerge from existing social structures. However, algorithms latch onto existing desires and new platforms cater to existing social and political divisions.

However, as Munn rightly argues, the new age of hate—repackaged on digital platforms, and aided by algorithm-dictated online platforms—presents newer challenges for society. "Hate is being reinvented" (p. 16), asserts Munn, as he laments that what we are currently witnessing on digital

platforms is the mainstreaming of hate: "New forms of hate are just not novel but successful, spreading more effectively to new audiences and asserting a more insidious influence" (p. 16). He asserts that repackaged hate via hashtags, online forums, Internet memes, algorithmic recommendations, etc., has become more enduring, more appealing, and more likely to spread.

To examine digital hate, Munn studies four different yet similar platforms—*8chan* (an image board site founded in 2013 that is linked to White supremacy, neo-Nazis, antisemitism, alt-right), *Parler* (a social media site linked to conservative views and activity), *QAnon* (a far-right conspiracy theory group), and *Gab* (a newer "friendly hate" social media site linked to White supremacy, neo-Nazis, far-right views). These four selected platforms, regardless of the platforms design and affordances, are far-right conservative platforms that propagate right-wing ideology.

In this book, Munn attempts to understand the mind of an online user by examining the words of users themselves collected from platform posts, interviews, online ethnographies, and other sources. For example, he studies one year of *QAnon* posts to identify various themes in the online discourse. To explore each network, he collects and analyzes posts from the community and draws out teams and narratives. He also analyzes the design and affordances of these platforms focusing on how they shape communication and behavior. In his analysis, he draws heavily from disciplines such as sociology, media theory, platform studies, media, history, race, and cultural studies to present a comprehensive view of how digital hate changes an individual, his immediate community, and the society overall.

Throughout the text, Munn shies away from the larger debate on terrorism and radicalization but does just enough to link ideas of online hate to the broader ideas of violent attacks and terrorist radicalization that attract a lot more attention and interest from not only the government but also from the general public. Munn, however, makes it clear that hate, as an emotion, is intrinsic to human existence. It may or may not produce any real-life violent attacks; many hateful comments remain just comments online and never escalate to real violence. Yet, he contends that the isolated acts of violence such as mass shootings do not exist in isolation and individuals indulging in such acts can be traced back to radicalized online communities that form a distorted worldview.

Luke Munn turns to philosophy while concluding this book, where he offers possible solutions to dealing with individuals steeped in digital hate and a radicalized worldview. In the last chapter, titled "Drawn Out of Hate," Munn examines how radicalized individuals can be brought to the mainstream. Here, Munn draws heavily from philosophers such as C. Thi Nyugen and Quassim Cassam and takes an empathetic view of the situation. It is in this chapter that Munn's ideas around hate are clear: He views hate as a fundamental human emotion (much like love) and not something that can (or should) be kicked out of the human psyche altogether. His approach of correcting digital hate using empathy, real-life community network, dialogue, and counternarratives, thus, may seem mild or even a "kid-gloved treatment" to some. Or, it may also seem too traditional to some. But Munn asserts that solutions lie in simplicity—reconnecting with family and friends and opening up one's worldview. Deradicalization or counter-radicalization does not work, claims Munn. Rather, hope lies in the word "recovery," per the author. Munn says, "Recovery does not hinge around some act of shocking violence. It is not obsessed with defusing the individual" (p. 159). The rationale Munn provides for an empathetic approach is the debatable notion that hateful speech rarely, if at all, leads to any

violent acts. Munn believes that digital hate spread in online communities is restricted to the emotion of hate, and it seldom escalates into a major, real-life violent event. Thus, the remedy to correct digital hate is not harsh counter-radicalization measures but showing the victims empathy and concern. "Counter-radicalization is haunted by the possibility of a spectacular violent act—a bombing, a shooting, and attack—and seeks to prevent this horror from happening to its citizens" (p. 158). In Munn's opinion, that violent moment will never arrive for individuals who are drawn toward hateful ideologies and hateful communities online.

After conducting interviews with users who want to deradicalize themselves, Munn says that recovery is something that an individual may desire for himself or herself. In other words, the process of recovery could be self-initiated. Recovery, according to Munn, may also have some elements of humanity in its approach; it treats the people as some misdirected individuals who can be brought back to the mainstream by dialogue and engagement. "Blinkered information environment produces a blinkered understanding of the world, a consequence with political, social, and cultural fallout. But this selective exposure is incidental rather than malicious" (p. 163), writes the author.

Any user of technology, be it an academician looking for scholarly analysis of the spread of hate online or an average user who spends time on digital platforms, will find Munn's book useful in understanding how individuals get sucked into the blackhole of digital despise.