

## Anders Behring Breivik's use of the Internet and social media<sup>1</sup>.

Jacob Aasland Ravndal<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

Did the Internet play a decisive role in Anders Behring Breivik's violent radicalization? It has proven difficult to understand if and how the Internet influences radicalization processes leading to political violence (Conway 2012). The Internet constitutes only one out of a wide range of factors with a potential influence on radical and violent behavior. We also lack detailed empirical data about the online lives of modern terrorists.

The case of the Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik offers unique insights into the online activities of a terrorist who used the Internet and social media in almost every thinkable way. Not only did Breivik compile his 1516-pages long compendium based exclusively on Internet sources. Before the attacks, he was also an active discussant on a number of mainstream and extremist Internet forums, and a highly dedicated online gaming enthusiast.

This article reviews new sources on Breivik's Internet adventures and road to militancy. It is primarily based on Breivik's original posts and comments on various Internet discussion forums between 2002 and 2011.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Breivik's trial hearings introduced a wealth of new information regarding his use of the Internet.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the article draws on a collection

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<sup>2</sup> Jacob Aasland Ravndal is a research fellow and Ph.D. candidate at the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (FFI). He studies far-right terrorism and violence in Europe, and has followed the Breivik case closely. Mr. Ravndal holds a master's degree in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Oslo.

<sup>3</sup> Internet forums and blogs that have identified and released records of Breivik's postings include *The Norwegian Progress Party's Youth debate forum*: <http://www.holst.no/ahc.bulletin/breivik-fpu-debattforum-alle.pdf>, *Document.no*: <http://www.document.no/anders-behring-breivik/>, and *Gates of Vienna*: <http://gatesofvienna.blogspot.no/2011/07/comments-by-breivik-at-gates-of-vienna.html>. In addition, Breivik's posts on *Stormfront* have been made available online: <http://griffinwatch-nwn.blogspot.no/2011/08/anders-breivik-and-his-four-stormfront.html>. Breivik was also active on several other forums, for instance *hegnar.no*, but these records have to date not been made publically available.

<sup>4</sup> The author was present during the whole trial. All references to the trial hearings are based on the author's own notes unless otherwise cited.

of Breivik's private e-mails which was forwarded by Norwegian hackers to a Norwegian journalist six days after the terrorist attacks. A synthesis of the more than 7000 e-mails was later published as a book (Stormark 2012).

A key finding in this study is that Breivik likely never discussed his terrorist plans with anyone online. Moreover, his comments on various Internet forums do not stand out as particularly when compared to typical far-right online discourse. In other words, Norwegian security authorities would likely not react to his online postings even if he was being monitored.

Breivik's online posts also indicate that his critical views on Islam and socialism had been established long before the so-called counterjihad blogs were created. This means that these blogs may have played a less decisive role for Breivik's early radicalization than assumed by many. Later on, however, these blogs certainly strengthened Breivik's radical thinking, although they come across as far less radical than his own ideological statements after 22 July.<sup>5</sup>

Breivik's e-mail correspondence shows that he first and foremost wanted to become a professional author and publisher. He proposed to establish a so-called cultural conservative paper journal together with Norwegian bloggers he admired, who were also critical of Islam and multiculturalism. He also tried to impress the Norwegian blogger Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen, better known as Fjordman, with his book project, but was given a cold shoulder. The fact that he was rejected by several of the people he looked up to may have had a decisive influence on his violent radicalization.

Breivik gathered all the necessary information to build his bomb online. He also financed the terrorist attacks through an online company, and used the Internet, in particular e-Bay, to buy materials such as body armor, weapons components and bomb ingredients. Breivik also systematically used social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter for propaganda purposes.

Finally, Breivik was an extremely dedicated online gaming enthusiast. Playing online games dominated his daily life during the years leading up to the attacks. One cannot dismiss theories that the extreme amount of time spent on playing online games while being

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<sup>5</sup> For a more in-depth review of Breivik's ideology, see Ravndal (2012).

isolated from friends and relatives may have had an impact on his disposition to engage in extreme violence.

In the following sections, this article describes Breivik's use of the Internet and social media along four dimensions: (1) online radicalization, (2) online gaming, (3) online attack preparations, and (4) online propaganda.

### **Online radicalization**

Much of the academic literature on the relationship between the Internet and political violence is concerned with online radicalization processes (see e.g. Köhler 2012; Jackson and Gable 2011; Thompson 2011; Policy Planners' Network 2011; HIS 2009; Stevens and Neuman 2008). However, a fundamental challenge is that online radicalization is very hard to trace and measure empirically. This is also the case with Breivik. One way of tracing online radicalization is to look systematically at the evolution of a person's political views expressed online. Yet, even if a person appears to have become radicalized over time, it is hard to tell if the radicalization was caused by experiences on the Internet, or offline factors.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Breivik's Internet communication between 2002 and 2011 is that most of his political statements do not come across as more extreme than mainstream far-right thinking. He never openly discussed the use of violence as a legitimate means to further political aims. This does not mean that Breivik did not radicalize significantly throughout this period, he clearly did. However, he appears to have kept his darkest thoughts to himself, or at least, he did not publish them online before executing the attacks.

In addition to writing on politically neutral and conservative online debate forums, Breivik was a member of several far-right extremist forums. He registered a user account on the world's largest online forum for white nationalism – *Stormfront* – in 2008. In his post on *Stormfront* he revealed that he was interested in race theories, and that he wanted to unite different factions of the far-right movement. Breivik also registered a user account for the Nordic far-right extremist forum *Nordisk.nu* in 2009 (Lowles 2011).

Several experts have argued that the so-called counterjihad movement played a crucial role in Breivik's violent radicalization (Archer 2011, Fekete 2011, Strømme 2011). The term

counterjihad refers to a transnational political movement whose main objective is to reverse Muslim immigration and the introduction of Islamic culture to Western societies (see Archer 2008). It is beyond doubt that Breivik drew influence from several counterjihad bloggers, such as Fjordman, Robert Spencer and Andrew Bostom. However, a closer examination of Breivik's posts on different Internet forums suggests that his radical ideas were established long before these counterjihad blogs were established.<sup>6</sup>

Breivik expressed his irrational fear of Muslims and Islam already in 2002, on the online discussion forum of the Norwegian Progress Party's Youth (FpU). In his comments he describes Islam as a culture that breeds terrorism, discriminates against women, and violates basic human rights. In one of his posts, he also refers to the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci's theory about a secret Islamic invasion of Europe. On the other hand, Breivik was at this point willing to admit that Islam as a whole was not necessarily the problem, but subcultures within it, a stance he would later abandon.

Breivik's posts on the FpU-forum also demonstrate that he already by 2002-2003 had developed a strong skepticism towards socialism and as its role in what he perceived as a deliberate Islamization of the West. Coincidentally, on 22 July 2003, precisely eight years before the attacks, Breivik posted the following comment on the FpU-forum:<sup>7</sup>

The socialists dominate almost throughout Europe, which is the main cause for this [situation]. The media "labels" persons/groups as Nazis, racists, fascists etc. if they show devotion against immigration/Islamization.

It seems like both Germany and France are a lost cause (To many it could well look like they have become a stronghold for socialism/Islam). The socialist's majority is TOO big.

What is most frightening is that the Muslim population in Norway increases. It is commonly known that 90-95% of ALL Norwegian-Muslims vote for socialists. In other words, a new Muslim in Norway is the same as a new socialist.

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<sup>6</sup> Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen's blog *Fjordman* was created in 2005, although he had been posting on various blogs since 2003 under the pseudonym "Norwegian Kafir". Robert Spencer's blog *Jihad Watch* was launched in 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Author's translation from Norwegian to English. The quote is an excerpt of a longer post. Punctuations and syntax is kept as originally written.

These ideas are clearly echoed in the counterjihad literature which Breivik was to discover later. He has, for example, claimed that he only started reading Fjordman's essays in 2008 while working on his compendium (Enebak 2012:81).

In 2008, Breivik also criticized several well-known counterjihad bloggers for not being sufficiently radical. In one post on the counterjihad blog *Gates of Vienna* dated 16 October 2008, Breivik addressed Fjordman and other key figures within the Counterjihad movement such as Robert Spencer, Bat Ye'Or (whose real name is Gisèle Litman) and Andrew Bostom. Here, he specifically contrasted Fjordman's proposal to ban all Muslim immigration against his own and more radical proposal to deport all Muslims from Western countries. In one of the paragraphs, he wrote the following:

Why havent you or any of the other current authors on the Eurabia related issues/Islamisation of Europe (Fjordman, Spencer, Ye`or, Bostom etc.) brought up the "D" word? I assume because it is considered a fascist method in nature, which would undermine your/their work? Why would it undermine their efforts when it is the only rational conclusion, based on the above argument? As far as I know, it's not illegal in Europe to suggest deportation as a future method when discussing future hypothetical World Orders (correct me if im wrong though, Im not 100% sure, lol)!

If Breivik considered these critics of Islam to be less radical than him, how can they possibly have contributed to his own radicalization? In other words, is it possible to be radicalized by someone less radical than yourself? The answer is probably yes. Although Breivik's ideas come across as more extreme than these bloggers, he considered them to be ideological authorities with strong credibility. In that sense, their writings contributed to validate key premises of Breivik's more extreme ideas.

Another mechanism that can lead to radicalization is when an individual or a group is ignored or rejected by someone they seek recognition from (see e.g. Della Porta 1995). The result can be that such rejection or ignorance is compensated for by forming new more radical groups and ideas. There are reasons to believe that this may have been the case with Breivik.

Breivik's private e-mail correspondence reveals that he in 2009 put a lot of time and devotion in trying to establish a paper journal in cooperation with the Norwegian conservative blog *Document.no* and the Norwegian Progress Party (Stormark 2012:239-248). He also wanted to assist *Document.no* in improving their use of social media platforms, and help Fjordman distribute his book *Defeating Eurabia* to a wider audience.<sup>8</sup>

However, Breivik's proposals were rejected by all parties. He also desperately tried to impress Fjordman with his own book project, but was given a cold shoulder. One can only assume that this was a considerable disappointment for Breivik. He appears to have been genuinely interested in becoming an author and publisher. Being rejected by the people he admired the most could have had a greater impact on him than the actual contents of their blogs.

Breivik started the physical preparations of the terrorist attacks the same year as his proposals were turned down. What would have happened if Breivik's paper journal project was embraced, or if he was recognized as a writer by someone like Fjordman? Would he still become a terrorist, or was that plan B? Fjordman and other anti-Islam bloggers clearly influenced Breivik, but should not be seen as primary reasons for why he went along a more violent path. The drivers behind his violent disposition may also be found elsewhere, such as in his psychopathological profile, his difficult childhood, and in his year-long isolation from the real world and escape into a virtual fairytale-like reality in online computer games.<sup>9</sup>

### **Online gaming – a neglected radicalization factor?**

It may not have been the violent contents of computer games *per se* that influenced Breivik's disposition to engage in mass murder. Many kids play violent games, yet very few become violent. However, one may assume that the amount of time spent playing online games while being isolated from friends and relatives may have influenced Breivik's ability to grasp the ramifications of his massive violence.

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<sup>8</sup> Between 7 September 2009 and 25 March 2011, less than four months before the terrorist attacks, Breivik wrote 76 posts on *Document.no*. Evidence from the police investigation showed that Breivik started his preparations for the attacks about the same time as he started being an active discussant on this blog. Yet there is nothing in his 76 indicating that he was preparing a terrorist attack.

<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed analysis on characteristics and explanations of single-actor terrorism, see Nesser (2012).

A lot of research has been done on the immediate and long-term effects of playing violent computer games (see e.g. Hasan et al. 2013, Hasan et al. 2012, Bushman and Bibson 2011). Yet there is hardly any research on how years of isolation in a virtual world influences on (anti-)social behavior. This is hard to measure scientifically as few would be willing to participate in an experiment that involved years of isolation in virtual space. An interesting parallel may however be drawn to the Japanese phenomenon of social withdrawal known as *Hikimori*, and its connection to a series of violent incidents (Rees 2002).

In 2006, Breivik moved back to his mother's apartment and took a year off only to play computer games. In court, he claimed this was "a martyrdom present" to himself, because he knew he was going to be part of a suicide mission in the future.

He primarily played the multiplayer game *World of Warcraft* (WoW). According a fellow gamer who gave testimony in court, Breivik spent at the most some 16 hours per day playing WoW. He was well liked among his fellow gamers, and was also a so-called guild-leader.

From 2006, Breivik played online games regularly for two years and three months. He then took six months off, before he continued playing for one year and three months, followed by a pause of nine months, before he finally went back to playing again (Stormark 2012: 59).

One of Breivik's first WoW-characters was "Andersnordic". He was a level-77 so-called "mage" with the Justicar title, an accomplishment that takes quite a lot of time and "player-killing" to acquire (Schereier 2012). Later on, he also played two other characters on a different server; a human female mage named "Conservatism" and a tauren female "druid" named "Conservative" (Schereier 2012).

Breivik was an extremely dedicated player, and would go as far as to mathematically calculate the probabilities of which strategies that were most likely to succeed in the game. He also played other games, including *Age of Conan*, *Modern Warfare*, *Imperial Warfare*, *BioShock*, *Mass Effect*, *Evony*, *Astro Empire*, *Dark Orbit*, *Lord of the Rings Online*, *Starcraft* and others (Stormark 2012: 60).

Importantly, Breivik was hardly the first mass murderer being an ardent computer game enthusiast. Only within the last couple of years the world has witnessed several other examples. Two of the three members of the German far-right terrorist cell The Nationalist

Socialist Underground (NSU) reportedly spent hours playing violent video games (Spiegel 2012). Dmitry Vinogradov, a disgruntled Russian lawyer who carried out a shooting spree in Moscow in 2012, is being linked in Russian press to the extremely violent video game *Manhunt* (Good 2012). Finally, Adam Lanza, a 20-year old man who recently killed 20 young children, six adult high school staff members and his own mother in connection with a school massacre in Newtown, Connecticut, spent hours playing *Call of Duty* in a windowless basement in his family's house (New York Post 2012).

On that note, *Call of Duty* also received a lot of attention during Breivik's trial. According to the police investigation, Breivik registered an account with this game on January 18, 2010, and had an average playing time of 10 hours per month for one year and four months. Breivik's explained in court that the game primarily helped him practice the holographic weapon gun sight he used on Utøya. He also used the game to practice a scenario where police forces might attempt to capture him using a pincer movement. Yet online gaming was only a small part of Breivik's online attack preparations.

### **Online attack preparations**

The third book of Breivik's trilogy compendium contains detailed information on how to prepare a terrorist attack. All the information is gathered from the Internet. It includes details about the kind of security measures to be taken before and during an attack, and recipes for different types of explosives. Breivik claimed in court that he acquired more than 600 bomb-making manuals online, with recipes involving more than 100 different types of explosives. He also used the Internet to study al-Qa`ida attacks as well as al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula's *Inspire* magazine to obtain knowledge of the types of explosives and techniques to use.

It appears that Breivik, through experimentation and dedication, was the first person to produce a bomb from diluted fertilizer. The measure to dilute the concentration of ammonium nitrate in fertilizer was introduced in Europe after the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 to ensure that fertilizer products could no longer be used to manufacture bombs. Breivik was aware of this, and explained in court that it was the reason why none of the bomb-making recipes he had acquired would work. They either used illegal explosives



materials that were too risky to obtain, or they required the old fertilizer concentration. He therefore had to experiment and combine knowledge from different recipes. He also explained that despite extensive online research, he could not identify a single terrorist attack using the diluted fertilizer type available on European markets today.

Breivik also gathered information online about chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) weapons, but the quality of this material is poor in comparison to the information he compiled on fertilizer bomb production. Most of it is cut and paste from Wikipedia and contains several factual errors.

Breivik also used the Internet, in particular E-bay, to buy most of the materials he used for the attacks, including essential bomb-making ingredients, body armor and various weapons components.

Financing a large terrorist attack can be expensive, particularly if you are operating on your own. It appears that Breivik largely financed his attack preparation with earnings made through an online company called Diploma Service. It sold fake diplomas from American universities to foreign citizens. It is unlikely that Breivik knew that his earnings from Diploma Service would finance a future terrorist attack when it was established in 2002. However, the surplus provided him with enough money to quit working in 2006. When he finally depleted his personal savings on April 26, 2011, he started using credit cards, which he presumably also acquired online, to finish his attack preparations.

### **Online propaganda**

Breivik was well aware of how the Internet and social media can be used to effectively spread propaganda and build networks. This is for example documented in his e-mail correspondence with the editor of the blog *Document.no* (Stormark 2012:240–242). Breivik tried to convince him that the blog could obtain many more readers if it integrated social media platforms on it. His e-mails also demonstrated technical insight, and provided several concrete suggestions on how the blog could be improved.

According to Breivik's court testimony, the primary objective of the 22/7 terrorist attacks was to draw attention to his compendium. Seemingly, the attacks were only part of a larger propaganda campaign which was to take place largely online. Before the attacks, Breivik had

carried out what he called “e-mail farming” (Stormark 2012:236). This involved systematically collecting the e-mail addresses of other far-right activists, mainly via his two Facebook profiles. He claimed during police interrogations that he collected more than 8000 e-mail addresses with the main purpose of distributing his compendium as widely as possible. Because there is limit of 50 Facebook invitations per day, Breivik spent approximately 4 months identifying Facebook friends, sending out 100 invitations each day, 50 from each Facebook account. At one point, he had more than 9000 Facebook friends (Stormark 2012: 319).

The large amount of radical Facebook friends also caused Breivik problems because he was very concerned with keeping a low profile during the attack preparations. He was struggling with people posting inappropriate and extreme material on his Facebook page that could draw attention from the authorities (Stormark 2012: 320).

At one point, Breivik deleted both his Facebook accounts to become less visible. However, on 17 July 2011, five days before the attacks, he created a new profile on Facebook. He also created a Twitter account with the following quote from John Stuart Mill: “One person with a belief is equal to the force of 100.000 who have only interests” (Daily Mail 2011).

The purpose of creating a new Facebook profile and Twitter account shortly before the attacks was probably to act as part of his larger propaganda campaign. His Facebook profile was carefully crafted according to his compendium and presents Breivik as a Christian conservative who is interested in hunting, political analysis and classical music. In addition, his propaganda video which summarized the contents of the compendium was uploaded on the video-sharing websites Youtube and Vimeo, shortly before he detonated the bomb at the Government Quarter building.

Breivik’s private e-mails also show that he investigated the possibilities of hiring an online company to delete some of the negative publicity he was expecting online after the attacks (Stormark 2012: 257). He also bought Internet domains to create his own web-pages for propaganda purposes, for instance *thenewkighthood.com* and *thenewkighthood.net* - but never managed to get them up and running (Stormark 2012: 155–169).

According to the police investigation, Breivik's plans to distribute his compendium to the 8109 e-mail addresses he had gathered failed because his e-mail provider had a spam-filter which only allows 1000 e-mails to be distributed daily from one e-mail account.<sup>10</sup> Such challenges caused Breivik considerable delays, and may have saved the lives of many office workers who had already left the Government Quarter by the time the bomb exploded at 15:25. The delays may also have saved the life of former prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, who according to Breivik was his main target at Utøya. She left the island before he arrived.

### Conclusion

Would Breivik have become a terrorist and a mass murderer if the Internet did not exist, all other things being equal (*ceteris paribus*)? No one will ever know for sure. However, there are several reasons to believe that the Internet played a decisive role in his violent radicalization.

First, it provided Breivik with an alternative reality in which he could cultivate his radical views largely uncontested. Second, it provided him with relevant tactical skills and funding to build a large and deadly bomb. Finally, it allowed him to isolate himself from the real world while playing online games intensively over a period of several years. This experience may have influenced his disposition to engage in actual mass murder without being able to grasp the moral and human ramifications of it. As such, it is a factor that may have been underestimated in the existing analyses of Breivik's online radicalization process.

Hinweis

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<sup>10</sup> Court testimony given by chief inspector Kenneth Wilberg on 20 May 2012.

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