

**Eviane LEIDIG, *The Women of the Far Right: Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization*, Columbia University Press, 2023, ISBN 9780231210164, 288 p.**

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The introduction of Eviane Leidig's *Women of the Far-right: Social Media Influencers and Online Radicalization*, 'New Chapter,' cites a post by a far-right female influencer, Lauren Southern. A year later, Southern resurfaced on social media to highlight how she had since taken the 'real-life pill', had turned over a new leaf and didn't want to follow the 'unhealthy ideas of the far-right'. Ironically enough, the title of the post in which Lauren had announced her farewell to the alt-right world is the title Leidig selects for the beginning of her book, thus highlighting the complicated nature of the far-right digital landscape. The book is one of the initial scholarly works that delve into the dark underbelly of the world of far-right women, examining what it is about them that appeals to their audience.

Leidig builds dossiers on the activities of female far-right actors across social media platforms and how they use these platforms to further the movement. Her scholarship adds to the conversation around far-right influencers by interrogating it with a gender lens, highlighting how far-right women influencers market themselves as authentic and accessible while promoting a hateful ideology. Here, visibility afforded to them on social media platforms is the key which extends the branches of their influence to the mainstream audience. The book addresses the question at the fore – why do women influencers matter? How is their involvement different from the one of their male counterparts? Leidig contends that women influencers help to bring fringe ideas to the mainstream in a way which wasn't possible before – this argument premises the central claim of the book. Leidig's methodology seeks to incorporate digital ethnography, making the author very conscious of her positionality as a researcher. She religiously trails the online performativity of influencers across social media platforms, including Instagram and YouTube, as a

consumer of their content, ensuring never to interact. Instead of relying on interviews – which could have had serious repercussions given the nature of this kind of research, Leidig suggests that publicness is the key – a strategy of branding oneself while still promoting a political movement (12). As a self-reflexive researcher, Leidig states how she's immune to the messages and narratives authored by these far-right women influencers, but what's rendered invisible to her demands constant recognition of its social reproduction (216). The book expertly touches on different themes that far-right women exhibit in their online performance – from the employment of femininity to how social media platforms assist them in promoting far-right ideology, to digital entrepreneurialism through which they recruit, expand and propagate their agenda, and finally pointing to how their discourse can be dismantled.

Chapter one introduces the reader to the basics – definitions of the alt-right, femonationalism, homonationalism, and the role the contribution of the alt-right to the growth of the far-right in the US. It identifies similar strategies of metapolitical activism which have been adopted by the alt-right, and that were once implemented by organisations like Nouvelle Droite and GRECE, which rely on the act of cultivating long-term social and cultural acceptance of its ideology in society instead of just enacting it through elections and political parties. An interesting argument that emerges from this chapter denotes that the current alt-right movement is distinct from previous far-right movements because it's authored and sustained entirely online. Social media and the internet have altered the way these influencers interact with their audience – through messaging apps, teaching and learning new skills via video tutorials, discovering topics on shared posts and streaming services which become a source of entertainment.

The next chapter explores how social media platforms aid in the circulation of far-right ideology online. There's a constant re-iteration of the argument that the internet has become essential for the far-right movement, and that women are at the forefront of this. It is well illustrated by various strategies and examples that are peppered throughout the chapter, showcasing how the algorithms are unable to distinguish between conservative and far-right, which allows far-right ideology to circulate unregulated. Leidig states that influencers are micro-celebrities who use different strategies to appeal to their audience and gives a detailed outline of different strategies deployed by them. The concept of Networked Intimacy is used to

illustrate how the influencers bind their audience and create a perception of authenticity. She builds on the argument advanced by Rebecca Lewis in the 2018 *Alternative Influence Network*, in which she identifies political influencers as those who use micro-celebrity techniques such as accessibility, authenticity, and relatability to sell their audience on far-right ideology. Another important aspect that Leidig focuses on is the reliance of these influencers on visual social media platforms. Megan Zahay has observed how visuality acts as an aesthetic mode for anti-feminist messages, especially for far-right women influencers like trad-wives, that is uniquely powerful on image-based social media platforms. Another interesting aspect that Leidig explores in this chapter is the huge male viewership as opposed to the high female viewership these influencers have amassed. Leidig observes that it could be because these influencers function as honeytraps for the male gaze; while this idea opens an interesting line of research, she leaves the question hanging and doesn't probe further.

The third chapter chronicles how far-right women influencers perform femininity to further far-right ideology. The focus is on the depiction of their femininity, not feminism. They repeatedly push the narrative that feminism and the disruption of traditional gender roles have led to chaos in society. Far-right women bridge the manosphere and women-supported misogyny, using antifeminism and pro-men arguments to indicate societal degradation. She then delves further into different forms of engagement techniques that they deploy – paid promotion, establishing credibility as authoritative figures by sharing academic articles, scriptural inferences to appeal directly to their audience which makes them more relatable. Leidig notes that even within the online world, motherhood is weaponised in favour of the movement. She contends that when visual deception of an idyllic home for a far-right white utopia is communicated through self-presentation practices and techniques of influencer culture, it serves a metapolitical purpose (88). This is carried out efficiently by far-right women influencers.

In the subsequent chapter, Leidig follows the theme of trad-wives. She maps the overlapping layers of tradlife and far-right – how they engage in content practices to build attention and community. They try to create a perception of relatability with their followers by sharing experiences and guiding viewers with supportive and motivational language (96). Leidig slips in and out of far-right and alt-right every now and then, thus highlighting what binds them and how they intersect at several

points. While in the previous chapter, motherhood was seen as a weapon of mobilisation for the movement of the far-right, in this chapter Leidig digs further. The chapter was peppered with insightful analysis of instances and anecdotes which focused on child birth, identity as mixed-racial individuals, inter-racial marriages and usage of children as propaganda. She demonstrates how far-right women influencers are also particularly attuned to the idea of gun violence since the onus of protection of the family also lies on the woman.

Chapter five is particularly interesting as it looks at the concept of female entrepreneurship in the digital age (previously approached by Brooke Erin Duffy and Urszula Pruchniewska), i.e. how far-right women influencers exploit the market economy by selling ideology, and their brand as a lifestyle consumption to make the movement not only more visible but also to mainstream it. Throughout the chapter, Leidig doesn't just focus on the narrative woven by far-right influencers, but also focuses on how they use pop culture in favour of the movement. The chapter pitches the argument that women are the most crucial form of entrepreneurship as influencers, since they capitalise on their looks and youth to construct themselves as the most visible women on the far-right frontline (140). This helps them to build their audience, especially on visually oriented platforms such as YouTube and Instagram. The concept of attention economy is important as these influencers play an integral role in mobilising and recruiting supporters, creating solidarity for the social movements. She borrows the concept of *instafame* from Alice Marwick's work to explain the logic of attention economy. Thus, influencers practice a type of relational labour i.e. connections tied to earning money as their supporters can donate to them either directly through the platform or via crowdfunding (141). The chapter chalks out how these influencers exploit entrepreneurial strategies for ideological practices with the intent to advance the far-right political agenda. Leidig also makes a compelling argument about why the contemporary far-right's propaganda outreach is more powerful. How they mimic the aesthetic with which young women are familiar, in order to speak about their concerns and interests, is what gives them an edge.

One of the most provocative ideas that Leidig posits in Chapter six is how far-right women influencers play an integral role in solidifying the far-right's international connections. They cover myriad topics – nationalist ideology, travel disruptions, strategies for collaboration with other influencers, conspiracy theories

and even marriage plans. They produce documentaries and engage their viewers with intimate conversations, which allows them to appeal to a broad audience online. The chapter also focuses on sisterhood and how they were shunned by the outside community but found solidarity within the far-right community, which has helped them sustain themselves.

The final chapter of the book shifts the focus towards a more solutions-oriented theme. Leidig introduces the concept of *counterinfluencer culture* i.e. counternarrative efforts against those of the far-right. The author looks at a combination of online and offline strategies and methods that challenge the far-right, which included deplatforming, demonetization, deranking and detection. She gives insights about the limitations of each content moderation technique and how social media platforms can create a more conducive environment to curb hate speech and disinformation that goes around unregulated on these platforms. She offers a popular soft approach of counternarrative that requires joint efforts of government, private sector, and civil society organisations to oversee campaigns that counter and challenge extremist propaganda. An important point that Leidig raises is with respect to digital literacy initiatives, where she borrows from media scholar danah boyd. She notes that a digital literacy approach shifts the onus of responsibility from tech companies to the audience or the viewer. They are expected to self-investigate and make wise decisions in a landscape fraught with manipulation and propaganda. Developing media-making skills is seen as a solution to counter disinformation which is not the same as investing in critical thinking. Moreover, far-right actors also indulge in media literacy practices for recruitment and propaganda. Leidig threw in several measures to curb platforms from promoting influencers' political activism online.

The volume *Women of the Far-Right* is one of the premier works that focus on far-right women influencers and attempt to piece together what makes them more appealing as compared to their male contemporaries. The question of the role of influencers in spreading far-right ideology (see work by Rebecca Lewis), disinformation online (see texts Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis) and online radicalisation is not new, however Leidig bridges the gap by addressing the notions projected by women influencers and examines how they are more powerful and impactful than their male counterparts. One of the main arguments that Leidig puts forth is that these women make use of micro-celebrity techniques to appeal to their

audience – they are everyday influencers who could be beauty or travel bloggers and use their platform to bring fringe ideas to the mainstream. This argument adds to the larger theme of how the alt-right movement has become popular with the advent of the internet; however, a constant re-iteration of this argument is not justifiable enough. Leidig's extensive ethnographic work captures their journey as the far-right movement becomes an important part of their lives and, in some cases, what eventually drifts them apart from it. The book is thick with descriptions and paints a vivid and layered picture of how these influencers go about their daily lives online and use that space for the movement. However, it could have benefitted from interviews with these influencers, which could have brought out the nuances more explicitly. As of yet, whatever conclusions Leidig draws are based on the online projection of these influencers – they may or may not be true and are largely controlled and dependent on what these influencers want to showcase to their audience, whatever ulterior motive they might carry. Another area where this book lacks is the blurry lines between the far-right movement and the alt-right, which leaves the reader slightly confused about the narrative under discussion.