

LiA Project Report: Tracking the Supportive Network of Online Misogyny with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue

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Background

As my Leadership-In-Action (LiA) project from the start of June to the middle of July, I partnered with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in their office in London, England. This organization is focused on political research and policy recommendation/influence, but specifically on research and commentary concerning counter-hate and counter-extremism. When I was brainstorming an LiA project with them, my supervisor, Jacob Davey, wanted me to join them in their series of projects concerning extremism, online harm, and misogyny/gendered harms. As misogyny is a factor of congruence among many kinds of extremism which fail to match up as well with any other characteristic, and as the UK and EU governments are beginning to propose robust protections for women and vulnerable populations against online harms, this work is particularly relevant to the current European political moment.

To be more specific, my time at the ISD had me focused primarily on two projects, one ongoing (where my work contributed to a small part of the project) and one fully driven by myself and finished before the end of my LiA period.

- (1) A presentation to law enforcement about the institution of gender-based hate crimes as recognized hate crimes in the UK.
- (2) A “digital dispatch” article which serves as foundational research about how people access incredibly harmful AI tools – specifically, the tools used to create non-

consensual intimate imagery (images depicting real women in intimate situations)
utilizing generative AI.

However, I did have other tasks at the ISD, such as attending meetings for other projects and, in the final week, briefly attending to their upcoming extremism in gaming project.

My SMART goals reflect these two main goals, which myself and my supervisor discussed prior to my arrival in London, but I also added on two main goals for personal development. The first is that I gain experience with digital listening software, which I had never used before, but that I knew is incredibly useful in the kind of information-gathering that I needed to complete in order to create an accurate assessment of how people access harmful AIs. The second goal was mainly for professional development, as everyone seems to come to this kind of work from very diverse backgrounds, and learning about the many different avenues to doing political research may help me find my own.

SMART Goals

(1) Author a section of a long-form briefing paper exploring masculinity in European extremism, collaboratively with the ISD team.

- Specific – pertains to a singular output (the paper itself).
- Measurable – goal will be reached when my section of this document is finished and reflects the findings of the digital listening tools used to understand extremist action.
- Achievable – Will be done in collaboration with and guidance from the experts at the ISD.

- Relevant – will be useful to the ISD and the broader fight against extremism by providing comprehensive knowledge on the tactics, origins, and effects of misogynistic activity.
- Time-bound – will be done during the course of the 6-week project.

(2) Author a short-form 'dispatch' piece for others to use as a tool in building policy, to be completed within the project period (time management).

- Specific – pertains to a singular output (the online toolkit).
- Measurable – goal will be reached when my piece is deemed useful for educating the public about this topic.
- Achievable – Will be done in collaboration with and guidance from the experts at the ISD.
- Relevant – will be useful to the ISD and the broader fight against extremism by providing people not involved in policy with a brief understanding of extremism and misogyny.
- Time-bound – will be done during the course of the 6-week project.

(3) Use digital listening tools to track and analyze instances of gender-based online harassment.

- Specific – requires utilizing ISD's unique strategies and technologies to analyze online harms.
- Measurable – will result in a useful set of findings which create an accurate picture of online extremism directed towards women in the European context.
- Achievable – Will be done in collaboration with and guidance from the experts at the ISD, and with technology I can only find at the ISD.
- Relevant – will ultimately be useful to the completion of the above two SMART goals in providing some content to develop into briefing notes and toolkits.

- Time-bound – will be done during the course of the 6-week project.

(4) Personal goal: connect with at least 5 coworkers at the ISD and ask about their careers and lessons learned in their experiences with globally-focused activism, research, and journalism.

- Specific – involves just having discussions with at least 5 people.
- Measurable – will be complete once I speak with 5 or more coworkers about their careers.
- Achievable – I feel comfortable conversing openly with people already, and can easily start these conversations.
- Relevant – deeply important to myself as someone who wishes to do more work within the sphere of studying alt-right politics.
- Time-bound – will be done during the course of the 6-week project.

Results

Task (1)

As part of SMART Goal (1), I aided one of my colleagues in creating a presentation/report to be presented to government interest groups (mainly law enforcement) to make the case for why gender-based hate crimes should be added to the list of harms considered hate crimes under UK law. The main goal of this work is not only to symbolically recognize misogyny and misandry as real forms of harm which should be taken as seriously as racism or religious discrimination, but also to urge the UK to record harms against women in a unified way, as other hate crimes are recorded. Assaults against women that are done purely because they are women should not be recorded as merely ‘general’ assaults, but rather as a broader effect of a pattern of societal misogyny worth recording and responding to on a country-wide level.

For this work, I was first tasked with researching and compiling a list of gender-focused organizations which could possibly join in this effort as a coalition with the ISD – specifically, I was tasked with finding organizations which were both women-focused (such as women’s protection centres, feminist organizations, etc.) and men-focused (men’s protection centres, men’s rights organizations, fathers’ organizations, etc.). This was done within the first week of my LiA experience. Next, I was tasked with working directly with my colleague to prepare a slide deck for the presentation to government interest groups, which was a fairly quick endeavour finished by the second week, in which I followed the directions of my colleague as closely as possible, as she was the main presenter and thus needed this presentation to match her vision.

Task (2)

SMART Goal (2) mainly concerned this task. I was challenged with creating my own “digital dispatch”; a short-form article which serves as a resource that the ISD and the journalism that references it rely on for policy recommendation on the most recent issues. I knew, prior to arriving in London, that this dispatch needed to be focused on the safety of women, preferably focused specifically on the safety of women in online spaces and the growing web-hosted public society; however, I had yet to narrow this focus to something that could be managed within the timeframe. This would be the first sub-task within the whole of Task (2).

I had done prior philosophical analysis of deepfakes in my coursework, specifically linking the accessibility of deepfake technology (or technology that could fabricate intimate

imagery of real women without those women's direct involvement in creating that imagery) to a loss of sovereignty in the countries which continuously fail to block people from accessing these tools and committing online-based sexual crimes. Women fundamentally lose their rights, not by having their rights written out, but simply because enforcing rights violations is impossible when harm perpetration is so easy, so frequent, and so expensive to prosecute given the commonality of perpetrators being outside of the victim's jurisdiction. However, this prior research lacked any real assessment of how these tools are accessed.

I realized that the ISD and its robust tools (which I used to complete SMART Goal [3]) could be the key to actually making this philosophical theory of rights loss into an actually workable data set upon which I could build policy recommendation. For this, I used the ISD's access to BrandWatch, which allowed me to scrape data from across the internet and perform "digital listening," where I could look into where these AI tools were being mentioned the most, and especially where they are being advertised. I was able to locate most of the mentions on Twitter/X, as well as locating popular forums which featured conversations about which other tools users could turn to when their favourite tools were taken down by their creators, governments, or platforms for Terms of Service violations.

This showed that people can access tools not only by directly searching their names, but they can organically discover and access these harmful tools due to the massive volume of advertisements for them on social medias. My use of this digital listening software allowed me to identify the "supportive network" which prevented many current mitigation efforts from being effective. This resulted in enough concrete evidence to compile it within a "dispatch" report and

add onto it the implications of the data as well as my and my colleague's recommendations for the UK and EU governments.

Conclusion

All in all, I feel as though I satisfactorily completed all of my SMART Goals. My last goal was completed simply by building bonds with my colleagues throughout my work and always being curious about their lives before they arrived at ISD, and I found that I gained very valuable knowledge about how to return to this work post-Laidlaw program.

Working in the realm of misogyny and gender-based harms exposed me to many testimonies by local victims of these issues that felt Though I had very little direct interaction with victims, and certainly not perpetrators, I felt as though I always centred my work with the maximum benefit for victims and at-risk populations for online gender-based violence (such as women in political positions, women public figures, etc.) in mind. These two separate projects also exposed me to the two extremes of the UK approach to gender-based harms – on the one hand, gender is still unprotected as a class by the UK's hate crime legislation, on the other, the UK and other countries in Europe are deeply concerned about deepfake AI technology and are already proposing or passing laws to mitigate these harms in more meaningful ways than simply punishing individuals who publish AI generated non-consensual intimate imagery.