Introduction

The state of Rhode Island (RI), along with every other state in the nation, has its share of problems with political extremism, rage, and anti-government fantasies that can lead to targeted violence and domestic terrorism. Those who perpetuate extremist violence are motivated by ideologies, specific issues, or political causes. Today, social media and online forums are used to influence public opinion and spread violent extremist narratives and activity. Some individuals have engaged demonstrators and have targeted houses of worship and crowded commercial facilities or gatherings. Others have promoted a race war, justifying civil disorder that provides opportunities to engage in violence in furtherance of ideological objectives (DHS, 2021). Protests and political rallies have been co-opted by both far-left and far-right extremists. Violent extremists also target government, military, and police as well as private individuals based on race, gender, and other factors (Jones & Doxsee, 2020).

Rhode Island has long been recognized for its tolerance of nonconformists. It was established by Roger Williams after being banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636 for sharing his strange ideas about individual liberty and the separation of church and state. During the harsh winter of his banishment, he was sheltered and fed by the native Narragansetts with whom he had previously traded. Williams wrote that due to “having, of a sense of God’s merciful providence unto me in my distress, [I] called the place Providence, I desired it might be for a shelter for persons distressed for conscience.” Williams purchased the land for Providence and Rhode Island from the Narragansetts whom he considered the rightful owners of the land they inhabited.

However, despite Rhode Island's long history of tolerance, the contemporary threat of extremist violence is real in our small state. Residents see evidence of hateful ideologies and violence in their communities and online. We write this at a time of significant increases in gang violence in Rhode Island urban communities. We have witnessed widespread stickering of neo-Nazi and KKK recruitment messages on traffic signs and other surfaces. Members of online social networks share heinous forms of digital media that arouse strong emotions, including hatred and fear. As national security expert Dr. Herb Lin of the Hoover Institution recently told a subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, "Information warfare threat to the United States is different from past threats and it has the potential to destroy reason and reality as a basis for societal discourse... Perpetual civil war, political extremism, waged in the information sphere and egged on by our adversaries is every bit as much of an existential threat to American civilization and democracy as any military threat imaginable."

In 2020, the Southern Poverty Law Center identified several active hate groups in the state. A recent Boston Globe article about Rhode Island residents who attended the January 6th rally in Washington that escalated into the insurrection that breached the Capitol Building stated, “They left their homes in Richmond, Johnston, and Cranston, in Newport, West Greenwich, Providence, and Warwick, responding to the call of a leader who needed his ‘Patriots.’” In other words, they were from every part of this small state - north, south, east, and west.

For this reason, this project puts forward a statewide model for addressing the threat of violent extremism using media literacy, dialogue, and active listening by mobilizing a coalition of diverse residents of the state as key stakeholders. The practice of media literacy education is rooted in dialogue, which may enable people to overcome the dangers of “high conflict,” a phenomenon that occurs when people are baffled by the insanity of the “other side”—in politics, at work, or at home (Ripley, 2021). People can learn to be resilient in the face of high conflict, especially in their encounters with harmful propaganda that distills discord into an us-vs-them kind of feud (Hobbs, 2020). Media literacy helps people recognize and resist harmful propaganda, conspiracy theories, and disinformation that may take the form of memes, news, activism, websites, videos, and social media posts.

It will take a sustained community-centered advocacy initiative to build the capacities of Rhode Island