The Role of Online Communities in the Expansion of Far-Right Extremism

By Mariana Díaz García

Report n. 33, November 2022

The Role of Online Communities in the Expansion of Far-Right Extremism

About the author:

Mariana Díaz García currently works as a fellow at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), under the framework of the Knowledge Center Security through Research, Technology, and Innovation (SIRIO) and the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) Risk Mitigation and Security Governance Unit. She is a member of UNICRI's Centre to Combat Disinformation in Geneva, Switzerland. She also collaborates as a Pro Forecaster for Intelligent Forecasting of Events and Risks (INFER), a project of the Applied Research Lab for Intelligence and Security (ARLIS) at the University of Maryland.

Her experience in international organizations include her role as researcher for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines–Cluster Munition Coalition (ICBL-CMC) and collaboration in projects with the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

Her work has focused on the role of technology in current security issues. This has included the malicious use of social networks by extremist groups and organized crime, as well as the use of technology in areas such as intellectual property crimes. Other areas of her research include technological strategies to improve CBRN and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) defense, cybersecurity, the prevention of organized crime infiltrating legitimate supply chains, and counterterrorism, as well as the interface of technology with ideology, radicalization, and the legitimization of armed and extremist groups.
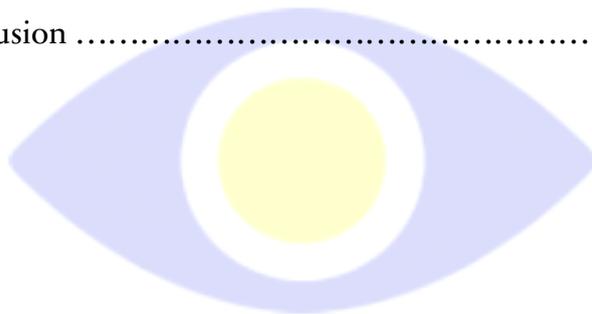
Currently based in Geneva, she holds a MA in Modern Middle Eastern Studies from Leiden University and a BA in International Relations from Tecnológico de Monterrey.

Contents Page

Introduction

The year 2020 represented a critical point in the way individuals relate to each other. All around the world, the health concerns about the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus—commonly known as COVID-19 or "the coronavirus"—led to isolation at home for many months at a time, and the socio-political and economic implications generated further anxiety and fear. Social media and messaging apps became the main means of collective discussion and response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Surveys of social media users in different countries showed an increase in the use of social platforms during the period of physical distancing at home,[1] enabling the creation and strengthening of online communities all around the world, where groups of individuals with common interests interacted with one another on different Internet platforms. In this scenario, far-Right extremist groups have adapted their propaganda to the online dynamics created by the new extensive online forms of communication consumption generated by the pandemic.

These far-Right extremist groups do not represent a coherent movement, yet as defined by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED), they are, rather, a "shifting, complex and overlapping milieu of individuals, groups and movements espousing different but related ideologies, often linked by hatred and racism toward minorities".[2] These groups usually represent a loose, leaderless, and transnational network, however the development and evolution of online communities has proven to be an effective way to implement strategies and techniques to spread their ideology and increase the calls for violence, jeopardize the role of authorities, and recruit new members. Moreover, "alternative" (meaning non-mainstream) social media platforms, with a smaller user base, and similar messaging apps, have contributed to the creation and expansion of online communities that give coherence and a safe haven to extremism through the adoption of conspiracy theories and far-Right ideologies and the spread of disinformation.

---

[1] Until March 2020, the worldwide social media consumption due to the coronavirus outbreak increased almost 45% due to the coronavirus outbreak, while an equal increase in 45% was reported on spending more time on messaging services. Survey was conducted among a number of individuals in different countries. Global Web Index (March 2020), GWI Coronavirus Research | March 2020 Release 3: Multi-market research. Available here.

[2] United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) (April 2020), Trends Alert "Member States concerned by the growing and increasingly transnational threat of extreme right-wing terrorism", p. 2. See also the updated version of July 2020.

Online Communities and Far-Right Extremism

The use of online platforms to spread extremist ideologies is not new, yet in recent years some events and the proliferation of social media and messaging apps have contributed to the expansion of these narratives online. Previous research has shown that the Internet has been used for multiple purposes by these groups, including for information provision, networking, recruitment, financing, and information gathering.[3]

In 2015 and 2016, there was an eruption of online hateful content surrounding the U.S Presidential Election, the Brexit referendum, Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist attacks, and the uncontrolled flow of refugees into Europe.[4] These events highlighted a phenomenon, hardly new, of far-Right extremist groups using online resources to capitalize on the fear, anger, and confusion generated by traumatic events in order to increase their power and reach, and pursue their strategic goals.

In 2017, the 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, United States, highlighted the central role of the internet in the creation of online communities with extremist views. The rally was promoted in popular sites, such as the Neo-Nazi blog *The Daily Stormer*, the racist libertarian blog *The Right Stuff* (TRS), and the white nationalist, antisemitic podcast called *The Daily Shoah*.[5]

In 2018, concerns over the consequences of far-Right extremist activity online continued in the U.S due to the attacks and failed attacks that appeared to have important online components, including the U.S mail bomb scare, the shooting dead of two African-Americans in a Kentucky supermarket, and the Pittsburgh synagogue attack, all of which took place just during the month of October.[6]

The relevance of online extremism was again in evidence in March 2019, when the terrorist attack on the mosques in Christchurch was carried out in New Zealand. The attack had central online elements, including a pre-planned online manifesto distribution strategy and a Facebook video livestream. During the following months, more attacks that had important elements related to the use of the Internet were carried out, such as the April 2019 Poway synagogue attack and August 2019 El Paso Walmart shooting, both in the United States, and the would-be synagogue shootings in Halle, Germany, in October 2019.[7]

---

[3] Conway, M. (2006, February 10). *Terrorism and the internet: New media-new threat?* OUP Academic. Available here.

[4] Conway, M., Scrivens, R., & Macnair, L. (2019, October). *Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). Available here.

[5] Hayden, M. E., Gais, H., Miller, C., Squire, M., Wilson, J. (2022, August 11). *'Unite the Right' 5 Years Later: Where Are They Now?* Southern Poverty Law Center. Available here.

[6] Conway, M., Scrivens, R., & Macnair, L. (2019, October). Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT). Available here.

[7] Ibid.

Activities showing the use of the COVID-19 pandemic to target immigrants.
Screenshot taken from a Gab Social far-Right group (April 2020)

This series of attacks and the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories based on far-Right extremist ideologies originated from specific events, such as the U.S elections and the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing the relevance of analyzing the online dynamics of these extremist groups.

First, the role of social media, and particularly "alternative" media, has been central in the creation and expansion of online communities. Alternative media can be defined as the sources and platforms that challenge traditional media because there is the perception that the traditional media is biased and conceals or distorts real information. Often these online communities portray themselves as an alternative media option. The producers of alternative media frequently seek to increase the visibility of groups that feel marginalized in the socio-political landscape, which, due to the nature of this dynamic, can transform the alternative media to a "self-perceived corrective" tool of traditional media and often become biased in nature.[8]

Second, the belief in belonging to a group that supports an "alternative" perspective can increase cognitive biases, including confirmation bias, where users search for, interpret, and recall information confirming their prior beliefs or ideas. Research has shown that both online and offline, self-identified communities become increasingly supportive of each other's views.[9] This is relevant in the formation and expansion of online extremist communities because they have based their online dynamics on creating echo-chambers of extremist content, where individuals find their opinions constantly validated by agreement, and reinforced by repetition, from others, without any exposure to alternative ideas or opinions. Echo-chambers can be used to generate or disseminate disinformation, distorting the perspective of the individuals and restraining their ability to consider opposing perspectives.[10]

---

[8] Walther, S., & McCoy, A. (2021, April). *US Extremism on Telegram: Fueling Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism.* Universitet Leiden. Available here.

[9] Ibid.

[10] GCF Global. (n.d.). Digital Media Literacy: What is an echo chamber? GCFGlobal.org. Available here.

Dynamics of Online Radicalization in Far-Right Extremist Groups

The role of technology, particularly social media and messaging apps, has been essential for the expansion of malicious activities of extremist groups. Far-Right extremist groups have disseminated conspiracy theories by adapting them to their traditional antisemitic, xenophobic, and anti-authority narratives with the objective of undermining trust governments, reinforcing extremist narratives, improving recruitment strategies, and motivating self-radicalized individuals to perpetrate real-world attacks. The groups are present on the main global social media platforms, though their activities are mainly been carried out on platforms such as 4chan, 8chan, 8kun, Gab Social, and Telegram.[11]

Screenshot showing a far-Right extremist channel sharing a post where it is falsely portrays their ideology in a positive way (June 2022).

The banning of prominent far-Right actors from mainstream platforms has also had an impact on the number of users, activity, and effectiveness of propaganda on alternative online platforms like Telegram, which has enhanced de-platforming by members of extremist groups of mainstream platforms and contributed to an overall network evolution to alternative spaces, where extremist content is harder to detect and delete. These dynamics have contributed to making alternative social media platforms a growing environment for a range of hateful ideologies that are aiding the spread of disinformation campaigns.[12]

---

[11] Diaz Garcia, M. (2021, December). *InFocus - Infodemic: Right-wing extremist groups and the risk of disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Freedom from Fear Magazine. Available here.

[12] Walther, S., & McCoy, A. (2021, April). *US Extremism on Telegram: Fueling Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism*. Universitet Leiden. Available here.

Disinformation and the Use of Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories, particularly antisemitic ones, have been historically used to target specific groups. Conspiracy theories can be defined as an explanation that ascribes the main cause of a series of events or a state of affairs to a group of conspirators, and in general the conspirators will be said to share three interconnected characteristics: their actions and goals are threatening or illegal; they have immense power, able to control events across vast areas and perhaps even the world; and they are able to control the "official narrative" to keep their activities secret and have initiated a cover-up to hide their work.[13] These theories themselves usually have structural consistency and often overlap considerably, yet they are tailored to fit in the narratives of the individuals and groups. Conspiracy theories can also be classified as conspiracies of control (addressing secret 'real' power relationships), plots against the group, specific event theories, complex or supernatural conspiracies.[14]

Throughout the years, far-Right extremist groups have adopted conspiracy theories to target particular groups, Jews above all. There are continuous references in far-Right online spaces to 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion', a fabricated manuscript, originating in France in the last decade of the nineteenth century and being published in Russia in the first years of the twentieth century, which falsely purports to be the minutes of a meeting showing Jewish leaders—the "Elders of Zion"—plotting for world domination. Another popular theme on these forums is "The Great Replacement Theory", which holds that European populations are being demographically and culturally replaced by immigrants and/or non-white people, and this is usually blamed on Jews and said to be part of their plot to take over the world. A related concept is "Zionist-Occupied Governments", the idea being that Jews secretly control Western politics. Naturally, Holocaust denial is rife on these sites: if the Jews are so powerful, the "reasoning" goes, then they cannot have been the victims of near-annihilation.

Conspiracy theories matter because they are especially a consistent feature of terrorist incidents, and the most common crisis narratives used by extremists include conspiracies.[15] This has been visible in the manifestos that have been widely shared online after numerous recent terrorist attacks, where the murderers justify their attacks and try to inspire copycats: they all contain disinformation and conspiracy theories.[16]

---

[13] Axelsen, J. E., & Emberland, T. (2020, September). *What is a conspiracy theory?* C-REX - Center for Research on Extremism. Available here.

[14] Miller, C., & Bartlett, J. (2010, August). *The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, extremism and Counter-Terrorism.* Academia.edu. Available here.

[15] European Commission. (2021). *Conspiracy theories and right-wing extremism – Insights and recommendations for P/CVE, 2021.* European Commission Migration and Home Affairs. Available here.

[16] Ware, J. (2020, March). Testament to Murder: The Violent Far-Right's Increasing Use of Terrorist Manifestos. ICCT. Available here.
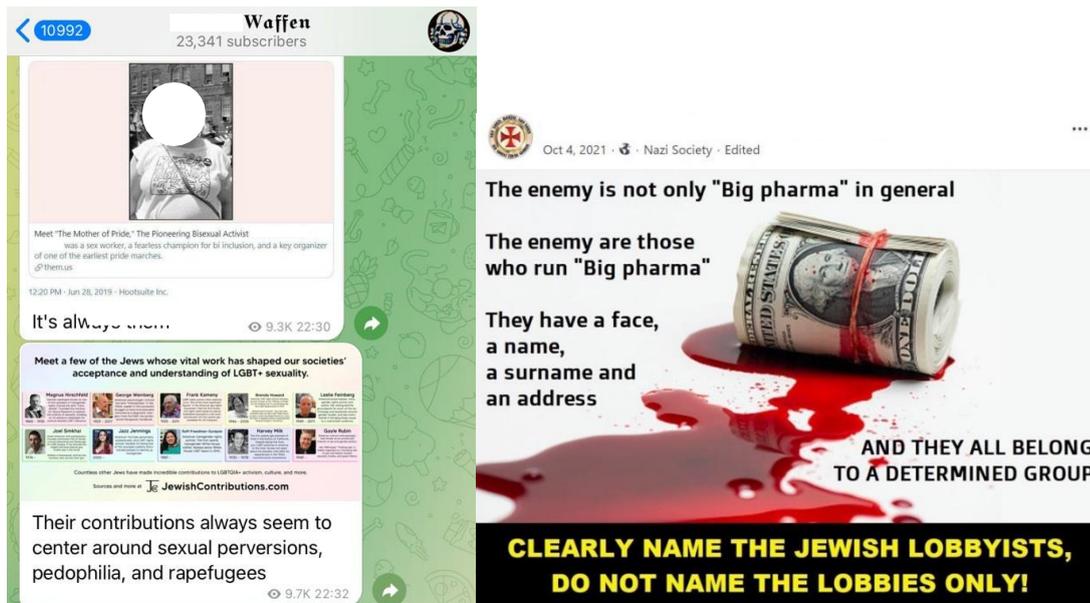
Screenshots showing the use of antisemitic conspiracy theories to disseminate disinformation in different groups on Telegram (October 2022) and Gab Social (October 2021).

Conspiracy theories are an important part of online communities since they can give a sense of community and common belief, working as a powerful recruitment tool for extremist ideologues. Moreover, when referring to extremism, conspiracy theories can serve as a "radicalizing multiplier" that contributes to the ideologies, internal dynamics, and psychological processes of the group, holding them together and pushing them in a more extreme and sometimes violent direction.[17] These theories can be socially significant for these online communities because they reinforce the unity of the group when they present revelations devoted to bringing "real knowledge" and the "hidden meaning" to those who deserve to know the truth, provide neat narratives to uncertain situations, adding a sense of urgency to fighting for the "right" cause, create a sense of victimization (indeed, often invert victims and perpetrators), spread distrust, justify existing prejudices, and solidify an "us vs. them" narrative.

Recruitment and Calls for Violence

Online communities have played a relevant role in extremist recruitment and calls for violence that have had real-world effects. Polarizing online rhetoric can amplify fears and hatred during a period of crisis, enabling extremists to radicalize and recruit new members. Offline, the narratives and disinformation shared by these groups has been identified in cases of lone-actor terrorism. The 2017 Global Terrorism Index stated that so-called lone wolf attackers were the main perpetrators of terrorist activity in the West, and that—since 2006—98% of all deaths from terrorism in the U.S. have resulted from attacks carried out by lone actors, a total of 156 deaths.[18]

---

[17] Miller, C., & Bartlett, J. (2010, August). *The Power of Unreason: Conspiracy Theories, extremism and Counter-Terrorism*. Academia.edu. Available here.

[18] McCauley, C., & Moskalenko, S. (2017). *Lone Wolf Terrorists: What Motivates Them?* START. Available here.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some far-Right extremist groups have used conspiracy theories to disseminate disinformation and to incite the intentional spread of COVID-19 in Muslim and Jewish communities and have used social media to share hate speech and disinformation, including related to use of vaccines. These strategies adopt some conspiracy theories to engage online users in their ideology and activities, and, in some cases, actions such as the creation of homemade weapons or infiltration in protests have been encouraged. Groups also frequently use memes, videos, animations, and surveys to promote their content. These activities have generated impact beyond online dynamics.
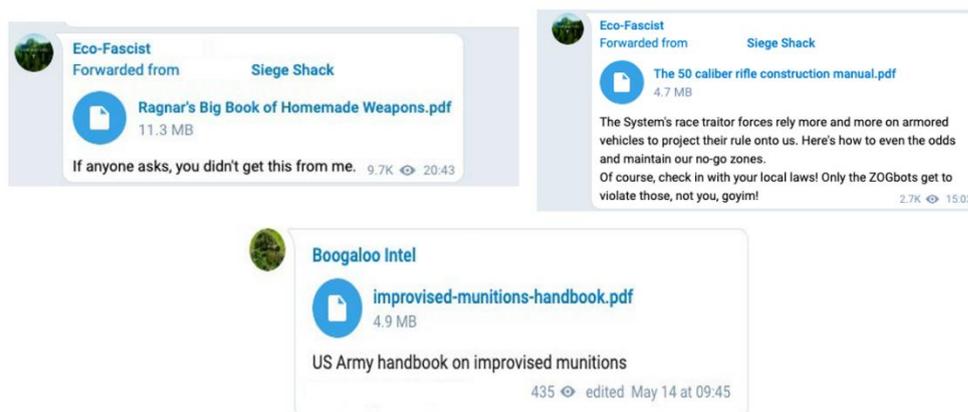
Screenshots of far-Right extremist channels sharing instructions to create homemade weapons on Telegram (May 2020)

Inspired terrorism was observed when FBI agents shot and killed a domestic terror suspect that plotted to detonate a bomb in a hospital caring for coronavirus patients in Kansas City in 2020. He was active in at least two neo-Nazi social media channels. His last online comment was an antisemitic message regarding the origin of COVID-19. Another example was the number of attacks on the Asian community in the U.S, which, according to the "Stop AAPI [Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders] Hate" report, 10,905 anti-Asian hate incidents were reported between March 2020 and December 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic.[19]
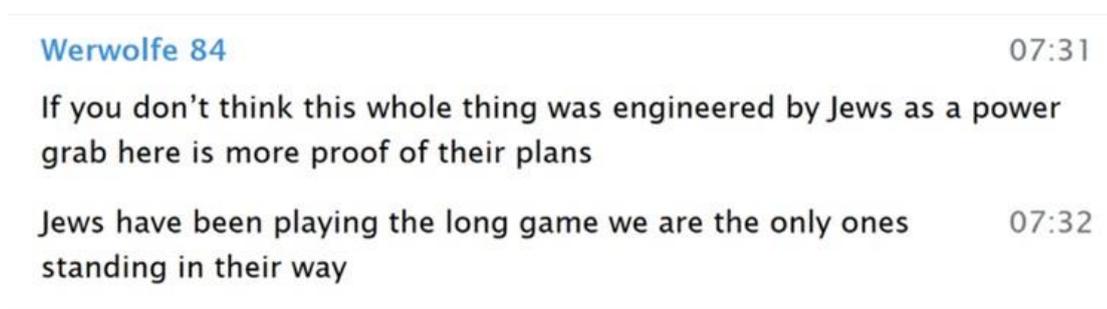
Message shared by the domestic terror suspect on Telegram regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.[20]

---

[19] Stop AAPI Hate. (2022, May). *Anti-Asian Hate, Social Isolation, and Mental Health among Asian American Elders During COVID-19*. Stop AAPI Hate. Available here.
[20] Martin, N. R. (2020). Heartland terror. Available here.

Regardless of the recruitment approach and the content used to achieve it, extremist groups have often tried to gain new members by using visually appealing content, including audio files, digital videos, interactive chat rooms, bulletin boards, cyber-cafes, webpages as well as video games, music, technology, art, dating advice, and humor pages.[21]

Visual elements have become more relevant with the adoption of memes by these groups to spread their ideologies online to a more mainstream audience with simple and highly visual content, and for the overall objective of recruiting new adherents.[22] Memes have become a social phenomenon to promote ideas, behavior, or style, and this is the main reason why violent non-state actors have been attracted by them. Unfortunately, they use memes as a method to share antisemitic, xenophobic, and radical content with a potentially large audience. For example, CoronaWaffen has used this format to suggest the intentional transmission of the virus in a meme format that was circulating online.[23]

Screenshots taken from the Telegram far-Right channel CoronaWaffen encouraging the intentional spread of COVID-19 to specific minority groups.[24]

---

[21] Caiani, M., & Parenti, L. (2013). *European and American Extreme Right Groups and the Internet*. Research Gate. Available here.

[22] An Internet meme consists of a phrase, image or video that spreads rapidly from person to person via the Internet through social media channels and messaging apps. Memes often intend to elicit humor to facilitate its spread. Puche-Navarro R. (2004), 'Graphic Jokes and Children's Mind: An Unusual Way to Approach Children's Representational Activity' in *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, pp. 45, 343-355.

[23] UNICRI. (2020, November). *Stop the virus of disinformation. The malicious use of social media during COVID-19 and technology options to fight it*. UNICRI. Available here.

[24] Ibid.

Technology, Online Communities, and Extremism

Technology, and particularly the dynamics of social media and messaging platforms, has played an important role in the creation and expansion of online far-Right extremist communities. As previously mentioned, far-Right groups have disseminated conspiracy theories by adapting them to their traditional antisemitic, xenophobic, and anti-government narratives with the objective of undermining trust in government and authority, reinforcing extremist narratives, improving recruitment strategies, and motivating self-radicalized individuals to perpetrate real-world attacks. In addition, this approach has allowed them to have a base that is not dependent on physical proximity that could allow the members to meet regularly and have been effective in inspiring lone-actor attacks.

The Role of Algorithms

An algorithm can be described as a set of well-defined instructions used to solve a problem.[25] In social media platforms, algorithms represent a technical method of sorting how information is displayed in the platforms based on relevancy instead of publishing time. This means that the user would see content that is more related to what they like, rather than the most recently published content, increasing the probability that the individual will engage with such content. Furthermore, algorithms can function in a collaborative way by directing users to visualize materials posted by other users that contain similar contents. They identify similarities to match users who share similar interests; by doing this, the user is directed to content that they might desire to engage with based on the fact that an individual with a similar profile looked for that particular source.[26]

In social media platforms, algorithms manage tasks such as administrating flows of content with the use of recommendations through the analysis of 'likes' and comments to improve content discoverability. Moreover, the interaction with content is also regulated by ranking and filtering information to create incentives and conditions of interaction for content creators. In this way, algorithms show content that can be more interesting for a user and avoid content deemed irrelevant or low-quality based on the interests of the individual.[27]

The problem is, if the user is engaging with a lot of disinformation and extremist content, the algorithms will feed them more of that, too, and the algorithms can also contribute to the further propagation of extremist material by directing casual viewers to more and worse related content.

---

[25] GeeksforGeeks. (2021). What is an Algorithm? Definition, Types, Complexity, Examples. GeeksforGeeks. Available here.

[26] Golino, M. A. (2021). Algorithms in social media platforms. Institute for Internet and the Just Society. Available here.

[27] Golino, M. A. (2021, April 24). *Algorithms in Social Media Platforms*. Institute for Internet and the Just Society. Available here.

The role of algorithms has been important in the creation of online communities of extremist groups due to the capacity to connect people with similar preferences and suggest similar content. The automatic prioritization and administration of content has allowed these groups to disseminate their publications in an easier manner to attract possible followers. This dynamic has been seen with the worst groups of all, such as ISIS.[28]

Screenshots showing the interaction between different far-Right channels on Telegram, where the same post was shared in different groups with similar ideologies (May 2020)

## Avoiding Detection and De-platforming

Online platforms usually have manual and semi-automated moderation mechanisms to detect and moderate offensive and harmful content. However, extremist groups have developed several strategies to avoid detection and to quickly replace their channels and groups in case they are suspended. The administrators and members of these groups are aware of the mechanisms implemented to regulate content and have developed methods to avoid it.

In order to avoid censorship, members of these groups replace offensive words that can be detected automatically by the online platforms. Online communities have created their own language to navigate online spaces. These digital "dog whistles"—the use of coded verbal or visual language—are understood by a specific in-groups, but not by individuals outside the group, which serves the dual function of concealing their online activities in plain sight from moderators and other out-group members, while providing easy signals of identification to like-minded individuals.[29] In social media platforms, this language can be seen in the adoption of hate-slang that uses benign words to refer to terms that would otherwise be detected and bring sanctions.

---

[28] Waters, G., & Postings, R. (2018). Spiders of the Caliphate: Mapping the Islamic State's Global Support Network on Facebook. Available here.

[29] Weimann, G. (2020). *Digital Dog Whistles: The New Online Language of Extremism*. Available here.

For example, far-Right extremists have undertaken what they call "Operation Google": a campaign to use code words that can defeat automatic detection systems like Google's Conversation AI (artificial intelligence). The upshot is a vocabulary of apparently harmless words to cover for hate-slang: Jews are referred to as "Skypes"; African-Americans become "Googles"; Latinos are "Yahoos"; and Muslims are called "Skittles". Another technique is changing letters for symbols (e.g., "S" becomes "$"), removing spaces in sentences, and changing vowels to numbers.[30]
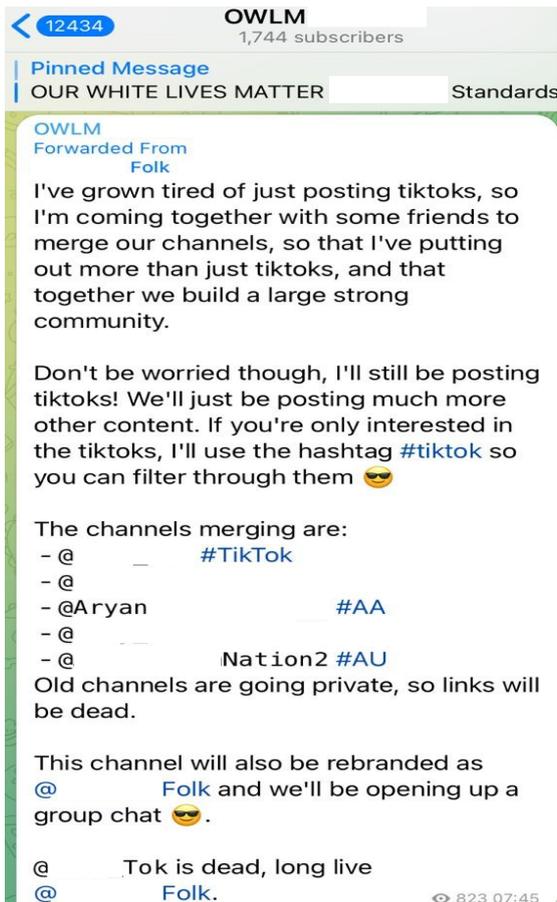
Screenshots showing different far-Right channels sharing back-up accounts for their followers on Telegram (October 2022)

---

[30] ibid

Changes in communication have been observed as part of the strategy of other groups. As an example, ISIS adopted the use of emojis as a substitute for words that would be otherwise detected (e.g., "weapon", "explosion", and "rocket").[31] In Mexico, drug cartels have used emojis for the illicit trade of drugs, such as fentanyl, through social media.[32]

Another common technique used by extremists online to reduce the risk of censorship is creating a backup account. In this way, extremists can immediately move the contents to a new account to redirect their audiences. Sometimes the administrators of these groups redirect their followers to accounts to social media platforms and messaging apps where their content is less likely to be detected.

---

[31] Scott, M. (2022). Islamic State evolves 'emoji' tactics to peddle propaganda online. POLITICO. Available here.

[32] Bastién, M. (2022, August 14). México ante el tráfico de drogas en Línea. El Universal. Available here.

Conclusion

Far-right extremist groups have adapted and taken advantage of the online platforms and messaging apps to create extensive online forms of communication to expand the impact of their activities, including the possible recruitment of new members and the dissemination of disinformation and extremist ideologies. The creation of structured online communities has allowed these groups to have borderless communication channels that can be easily managed and reestablished in case the group gets de-platformed or temporary censored.

Algorithms provide social media platforms the functions that enable the connection of people and the recommendation of content that fits the preferences of users. These intrinsic qualities of social media have been maliciously abused by far-Right extremist groups that created and expanded online communities in which their messages can reach a large number of individuals.

Furthermore, the online dynamics have resulted in in real-life events inspired by the incitement to violence that the groups continuously promote. The presence of online activity has been present in multiple lone-actor terrorist attacks, including the creation of posts and the distribution of manifestos to justify their attacks and inspire copycats.

Analysis of the online community phenomenon in the expansion of extremism is essential in order to understand the complex interaction between the activities that are carried out in the virtual world and the impact on strategies in the physical realm.