

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Far-Right Ecosystem in Ireland: History and Contemporary Trends

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Volume XVIII, Issue 4
December 2024

ISSN: 2334-3745
DOI: 10.19165/2024.1841

Abstract: It is often claimed that there is little to no organised extreme right-wing (ERW) presence in Ireland. The absence of the ERW is often attributed to Ireland's 'civil war' political system, however, in recent years, the country has witnessed an increase in both far-right and ERW activity via online activism, street protest, and even violence. Perhaps the most prominent manifestation of the ERW is in the online space, and this article seeks to understand the Irish online ecosystem by focusing on social media influencer activity, their role in the propagation of ERW ideas, the spread or contagion of ideas into and out of the Irish eco-system, and the themes that are dominant in this space. This exploratory study, which analysed 422,156 social media posts across four platforms (1 October 2020 to 30 June 2021), found that Twitter and Telegram played a more facilitatory role than YouTube and 4chan in the proliferation of ERW content in Ireland. The most frequently mentioned extreme right-wing influencers were Irish, British, and American public figures and social media influencers, and the majority of location mentions referenced the United States, followed by the United Kingdom. The most popular themes were global conspiracy theories followed by anti-left, alt-right, anti-black, and anti-government sentiments. The article concludes that there is ERW presence in Ireland, and it has its own online ecosystem aimed towards creating division and spreading ideologies of hate and, in some instances, a call to action.

Keywords: Conspiracy, far-right, extreme right-wing, Ireland, online, social media

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Introduction

While it is often stated that there is little to no organised extreme right-wing (ERW) presence in Ireland,¹ recent reports document a surge in ERW activity across the country, and point to an increasingly coherent presence, particularly in online spaces.² Considering Ireland's unique political history and, unlike its European neighbours, lack of a significant ERW party political presence, understanding the emergence and spread of right-wing ideas and activism in Ireland is very much rooted in local and national issues. The ideas that have come to dominate ERW rhetoric in the state are, however, linked to popular international narratives circulating widely amongst ERW communities, albeit locally interpreted.

Cas Mudde identifies the far-right as an umbrella term, centred on authoritarianism and nativism, under which sits the ERW.³ Bjørge and Ravndal, drawing upon Mudde, identify that the *extreme* right-wing rejects democracy and “promote[s] violence or other illegal or non-democratic means as legitimate”.⁴ This article focuses on the ERW, but acknowledges the fuzzy boundaries between the far-right and ERW. Thus, when we reference ERW, we are referring to the community within the far-right that encourages violent or anti-democratic means, while when we reference the far-right, we are referring to authoritarian and nativist ideology more broadly.

Using this framework, this article provides an overview of the contemporary history of the far-right presence in Ireland, followed by an exploration of the themes that are popular amongst and propagated by online far-right influencers in Ireland in an effort to understand issues of context and contagion of the far-right in the Republic of Ireland.

Globalisation of Far-Right Ideology

Contemporary Trends and Strategies

Although many far-right movements have their own unique brand of far-right nationalism arising from local history, culture, and political context, there is increasing concern about the potential for the globalisation of far-right ideology.⁵ Whereas the far-right movement has long been fragmented into various groups - neo-Nazis, incels, white nationalists, etc. - recent events and political victories have shown the consequences of the collective organisation of these groups and the mainstreaming of far-right ideology.⁶

Whilst disparate far-right factions pose their own threats, the collective organisation of these ideologically different groups under a singular influence poses its own dangers.⁷ Though there has long been far-right extremist and graphic content in circulation,⁸ far-right actors have been able to mainstream and globalise ideology by ‘casting a wide net’ to capture an audience susceptible to far-right messaging or tangentially related to the movement, exposing people to vague, ‘common-sense’ content that they may be ideologically aligned with before being exposed to more extreme far-right messaging.⁹

Online Spaces and the Globalisation of Conspiracy Theory Rhetoric

Perhaps the most prevalent tools for far-right globalisation are the use of conspiracy theory rhetoric and online spaces. Far-right actors have been adept at utilising online spaces since the dawn of the internet with Stormfront appearing on some of the earliest dial-up message boards.¹⁰ While there are far-right online spaces catering to every group, there is also a proliferation of content related to far-right conspiracy theories. Theories like Pizzagate (a conspiracy theory related to the larger canon of QAnon, which alleges American politicians and elites are involved

in ritualistic child abuse), and anti-vax theories have reached a wider audience on platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram.¹¹ Some of this content does not appear overtly far-right in nature to the average viewer, but can lead to an algorithmic bias towards additional far-right content.¹² This has had the effect of exposing a wider audience of people to far-right conspiracy theories despite the context in which they originated. It seems that the trend in far-right contagion has shifted away from local, homegrown ultra-nationalist movements (though this remains a central tenet for many far-right groups and actors) and towards the global stage where conspiracy theories abound.

Far-Right Activists Online

One of the contemporary trends in far-right discourse over recent years is the rise of far-right online activists or ‘influencers’ that attempt to drive discourse. While far-right activists have utilised the internet since the earliest dial-up message boards, social media has become a tool for far-right activists to create division and attempt to radicalise others.¹³ Although online far-right content encompasses a broad spectrum of ideology, online content is used to create a cohesive community or network online.¹⁴ The speed with which social media activity facilitates responsiveness to emerging social issues has also markedly increased in recent years, with online activism translating into offline action, often resulting in violence. While causal links between the online and offline remain unclear, research suggests that content shared via far-right social media sites creates a shocking and dehumanising rhetoric that contributes to ERW violence.¹⁵

Historical Context

The ‘Absence of the Far-Right’ in Ireland

As in other states in Europe, local conditions have a significant impact on the emergence of far-right movements and political parties.¹⁶ And while racism, ethnic and national chauvinism and anti-immigration sentiment certainly exist within Ireland¹⁷ - a coherent far-right has yet to gain traction as a political force.¹⁸ Perhaps somewhat simplistically, Kavanagh has claimed that the increased presence of populist right-wing parties has been “more of a characteristic of the core, or more economically advanced, European countries” rather than smaller countries, such as Ireland.¹⁹

Perhaps more telling is the history of party politics on the Island. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, Ireland’s two main centre-right political parties, trace their origins to before the formation of the State. The two parties have dominated Irish political and family life for generations and a key facet of their ethos and ideology is nationalism, specifically as it relates to independence from Britain and the annexation of the northeast of the country into what is known as Northern Ireland.²⁰ While the landscape of Irish politics has changed significantly since the War of Independence and the Civil War of the 1920s, national politics still operates within the well-known framework of ‘civil war politics’. The two centrist parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael as well as Sinn Féin, were formed either before or in response to the Civil War of 1921; their constitutional positions remain closely tied to this period of Irish history.²¹

While Ireland long functioned as a two-party political system, Sinn Féin has enjoyed a significant rise in popularity in recent years. Sinn Féin is a self-described republican socialist party seeking the reunification of the island of Ireland and the removal of British rule from Northern Ireland. It once operated as a political arm of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA); a paramilitary organisation engaged in guerilla warfare with the British state during the Troubles (1969-1998).²² Long the fringe party of Irish politics, it is now often seen as the

only viable alternative to the two dominant centre-right parties (Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael). At the time of writing, it was the most popular (albeit still currently in opposition) political party on the island, North and South.²³

In addition to these and other mainstream political parties, there are a small number of far-right parties registered in Ireland. The largest far-right party, The National Party, was formed in 2016 by individuals from Irish nationalist, Eurosceptic, and pro-life movements; its platform is built on xenophobia, social conservatism, and ethnonationalism. While members of the National Party contribute to far-right content online, they have no presence in the Irish government and performed poorly in the 2020 national election: none of its candidates received over two percent of first-preference votes,²⁴ and none were elected to parliament.²⁵ The party's leader, Justin Barrett, ran unsuccessfully for the Dublin Bay South by-election, in 2021.²⁶

Ideology and the Far-Right

Ultra-nationalism is a dominant theme expressed by the very diverse far-right actors operating across Europe. While not the only criteria for defining the far-right, nationalism is one of the five features of far-right ideology identified by Cas Mudde and plays a key role in delineating the boundaries of far-right movements.²⁷ In Ireland, the history of British rule, the Irish War of Independence and the partition of the island, and relatedly the system of politics that emerged in its aftermath coupled with the ongoing influence and outcome of The Troubles (1969-1998) blocked the emergence of successful far-right political parties. This, it is commonly argued, is due to Sinn Féin's ownership of the nationalist rhetoric normally employed by far-right parties in other jurisdictions.²⁸ While internal spats play out between the mainstream political parties regarding the ownership of this rhetoric,²⁹ narratives of nationalism in Ireland are difficult to separate from the unique situation resulting from the partition of the island into North (UK) and South (Republic). That is, those with strong nationalistic views do not need to seek out far-right parties; they can instead opt to support Sinn Féin. However, inclusivity is a key component of Sinn Féin's ideology. They have publicly defended "the rights of immigrants, Travelers, homosexuals [sic] and other minority groups."³⁰ For example, in 2001, it presented a policy, Many Voices, One Country which states:

*As Ireland becomes a more multi-cultural country, the challenge is to embrace our growing diversity as a source of strength and opportunity. To do this we must begin by opposing racism, discrimination and intolerance of any kind wherever it occurs.*³¹

Furthermore, in June 2022, Sinn Féin's First Minister Designate Michelle O'Neill called for tougher hate crime legislation:

*There can be no place for sectarianism, racism, misogyny or discrimination in our society.*³²

The party has also lobbied for improvements to the Direct Provision mechanism for supporting refugees and asylum seekers. They advocated for it to be replaced with an asylum policy which would "treat people with dignity,"³³ and have accused the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act (2004), which removed automatic citizenship for those born in the state, as racist.³⁴

Further complicating the ecosystem of the far-right in the Republic of Ireland is the complexity of local politics in Northern Ireland, where the label 'far-right' is often associated with Loyalist parties and factions who stand in direct opposition to nationalist movements both north and south.³⁵ For example, Mudde categorises the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) as a populist far-

right political party.³⁶ Therefore, in some respects, the main rival parties in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin, both serve the identity functions traditionally met by far-right political parties but with opposing ideologies.³⁷

While understanding the far-right, and thus ERW, in Ireland does not require a fundamentally different framework from other countries in Europe or the UK, its emergence and evolution must be understood in context. The manifestation of the far-right in Ireland largely adheres to Mudde's definition of far-right groups in that they endorse at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, and belief in the strong state.³⁸ However, due to the history and context of Irish nationalism and the political party system, the emergence of the far-right in Ireland has followed a different trajectory. Ireland's political legacy linked to civil war politics has resulted in essentially a three-party political system that has predominantly resulted in power sharing in government. This system emerged at the foundation of the state and is linked to positions regarding the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and British rule on the Island. Sinn Féin, the political wing of the Provisional Irish Republican Army, now a popular party both north and south has long been the Nationalist party and as such nationalism in Ireland refers not to the interpretation broadly seen across Europe or even in America, but the removal of the border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin, ostensibly a left-leaning, pro-immigration party, has thus occupied the space that in other jurisdictions has been dominated by right-wing organisations. As such, the far-right political landscape is not easily compared to our European neighbours, however, at the level of social and online activity, there are synergies that are irreverent of this history.³⁹ That said, Ireland experienced many of the conditions which have given rise to populist and far-right parties across Europe: widespread political corruption, "plummeting levels of party identification, an increasingly anti-political media, unprecedented immigration, a swift decline of the Church's influence,"⁴⁰ coupled with a fluctuating economy, memories of state-enforced austerity measures and a contemporary housing crisis.

ERW Activism and Violence in Ireland

Since 2019, there has been increased media and grey literature coverage of the far-right in Ireland, both in terms of far-right political parties and the emergence of far-right online 'influencers'. Influencers refer to people who present themselves on social media as "a public persona to be consumed by others."⁴¹ Influencers gain followers across social media platforms by creating content that appeals to their audience, mostly through vlogs, livestreams and response videos. Influencers often establish a voice and credibility by cultivating a sense of authenticity and personal connection in their content and by capturing strong emotions, often by addressing topics of social concern; COVID-19 was particularly relevant here.⁴² Many influencers encourage their audience to engage with their content by liking and sharing, which impacts algorithmic engagement, and exposes their audience to a wider network of influencers with similar ideology, thus building connections and ensuring that receptive audiences see their content.⁴³ While the majority of online influencer activity is not extreme in that it does not support, advocate for or glorify violence explicitly, much research and media attention focused on actual and potential violent extremism.⁴⁴ While An Garda Síochána's (Irish police force) annual reports contain no mention of far-right activity in Ireland, the Garda Commissioner has referenced the concerning rise of the far-right on a number of occasions. Furthermore, Europol's 2019 *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report* highlighted the emergence of a coherent far-right in Ireland. The report states that the Irish far-right has a strong internal network throughout the country and is linked with far-right networks in North American and various European countries. Arson attacks on direct provision (asylum services) centres driven by anti-immigration ideologies were also reported.⁴⁵ For example, hotels in Donegal and Leitrim were set alight in a bid to prevent them from being used to house

those seeking international protection.⁴⁶ The 2022 Europol report also noted how a man with British nationality, who “sympathized with right-wing extremism”, was arrested for importing components to manufacture firearms using a 3D printer.⁴⁷

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) recently tracked an increase in Irish and Irish-linked far-right groups spreading misinformation and conspiracy on Telegram, an encrypted messaging app, and the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism found evidence that conspiracy theories imported from abroad were prominent among Irish far-right online groups.⁴⁸ In terms of political purchase and popularity on social media, commentators and researchers have pointed to Telegram groups directing users to disseminate racist misinformation, “troll” or hijack hashtags for social movements, and make memes promoting far-right misinformation.⁴⁹ This trend of hijacking hashtags was observed in other contexts, specifically on German-speaking Twitter on which far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* used COVID-19-related hashtags to promote their content.⁵⁰

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Contagion of Far-Right Conspiracy

As this project took place in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to consider how the narratives around COVID-19 impacted far-right activity globally and within Ireland. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the potential for contagion within the global far-right network and represented a turning point for the mobilisation of the far-right in Ireland.⁵¹

A significant body of research supports the idea that the far-right in Europe operates as a transnational network, sharing information with other far-right activists and influencers in other countries.⁵² Even where language barriers are an issue, far-right groups manage to interact by using visual images and memes as a form of knowledge exchange.⁵³ Ironic or humorous memes are also used to soften the tone of far-right or conspiratorial messages making them more widely appealing.⁵⁴ Taken together, the goal of online strategies can be to ‘justify and legitimize racist attitudes’, trivialise issues, deny the existence of prejudices, reframe news stories to fit far-right narratives and/or harm the outgroup through denigration, bullying and the generation of ‘moral panic.’⁵⁵

In the case of Irish far-right groups, there is emerging evidence that international conspiracy theories have gained traction among an Irish audience.⁵⁶ The Global Project against Hate and Extremism found that far-right groups in Ireland were influenced by American far-right-associated conspiracy theories such as Agenda 21 and Cultural Marxism.⁵⁷ The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated far-right contagion and conspiracy in Ireland, both online and offline.⁵⁸ Ireland saw anti-lockdown protests organised or attended by far-right groups, as well as the online dissemination of conspiracy theories relating to the pandemic,⁵⁹ such as the Great Reset.⁶⁰ The Institute for Strategic Dialogue’s report on Irish far-right activity on Telegram revealed that far-right content intersected with Irish anti-lockdown and COVID-19 conspiracy theory content, with nine percent of messages on COVID-19 related Telegram channels originating from a far-right source.⁶¹ This highlights the interplay between Irish anti-lockdown and COVID-19 conspiracy theory communities and the far-right. Due to this, it was important to examine the volume of COVID-19-related topics in Irish ERW online spaces in order to understand the interplay between pandemic discourse and ERW rhetoric, and how much these spaces potentially overlap.

The remainder of this article seeks to understand the far-right online ecosystem in Ireland by focusing on influencers and their role in the propagation of dominant ERW ideas seen in other jurisdictions as well as the manner in which they are using local and global social issues as

content to garner support online. Using data gathered from Irish-linked sites and individuals, this article explores the process by which ERW ideas are created, shared and made relevant to Irish audiences.

Methods

The present study is part of a larger piece of research which analysed 422,156 social media posts across four platforms, posted between 1 October 2020 and 30 June 2021. The objective of the study was to explore the extreme right-wing ecosystem in Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic and identify any links between conspiracy theories and the extreme right-wing.

To ensure compliance with the UK Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA) and General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the research was limited to explicitly publicly accessible platforms and accounts. To ensure that a reasonable expectation of privacy was not breached, data was only collected from accounts that satisfied one of two criteria:

1. The account had more than one thousand followers/subscribers on one single platform or;
2. The account had more than two thousand followers combined across platforms if the account was designated as explicitly public facing (e.g. online journal).

In order to map the extreme right-wing online ecosystem, the research team developed a set of keywords that included names of known extreme right-wing groups and influential personalities in Ireland. These keywords were used as a base to manually identify a core community and subsequently collect further keywords including relevant influencers, groups, channels and threads across Telegram, Twitter (now X), YouTube and 4chan.⁶²

These platforms have varying levels of moderation, and differing community standards. Telegram is a privacy-first messaging app which allows users to create channels, groups, and private messages. For the purpose of this study, only public channels and groups with no barriers to access were used. 4chan is a largely unmoderated forum that is known for its propensity for shocking and extreme content.⁶³ YouTube and Twitter (now X) are the two mainstream platforms examined; YouTube has a higher level of moderation.

A 'snowballing technique' in which these original spaces were monitored for mentions of *other* spaces, which were then included in the sample. These new spaces were also manually investigated by the authors to establish their relevance to the Irish-specific ERW ecosystem (i.e. whether they contained links to known Irish ERW influencers or groups. The snowball sampling yielded a total of 162 'spaces' featuring high volumes of extreme right-wing content directly relevant to Ireland. They were composed of 85 Telegram groups, 53 Twitter influencers and 23 YouTube channels which involved clear sharing of extreme right-wing narratives and content. On 4chan, a subsection of /pol/ called *Éire/pol/* was identified. At this point, a series of internal automated data collection tools were deployed. All posts from these spaces—between 1 October 2020 and 30 June 2021—were scanned for extremist content. This totalled 422,156 unique posts.

All of the data collected was then run through a data enrichment process involving the use of keyword tagging software.⁶⁴ This led to the creation of a database of 2,428 recurrent keywords which featured in extreme posts. This aided the understanding of popular themes and narratives discussed by the audience, popular influencers and the presence of discussions relating to other English-speaking communities. The breakdown of keywords developed are

as follows: 1,915 extreme right-wing relevant keywords, 139 COVID-19-related keywords, 77 keywords referencing specific ‘influencers’ and 275 keywords indicative of discussions of themes commonly identified in other English-speaking countries.

Ethics

Ethical clearance was provided by the Social Research Ethics Committee. All data collected was anonymised to ensure no URLs or usernames were collected. Data was subsequently cleaned prior to analysis to further ensure that no personal identifiable information was retained.

Results

Figure 1: Breakdown of Post Volumes by Platform

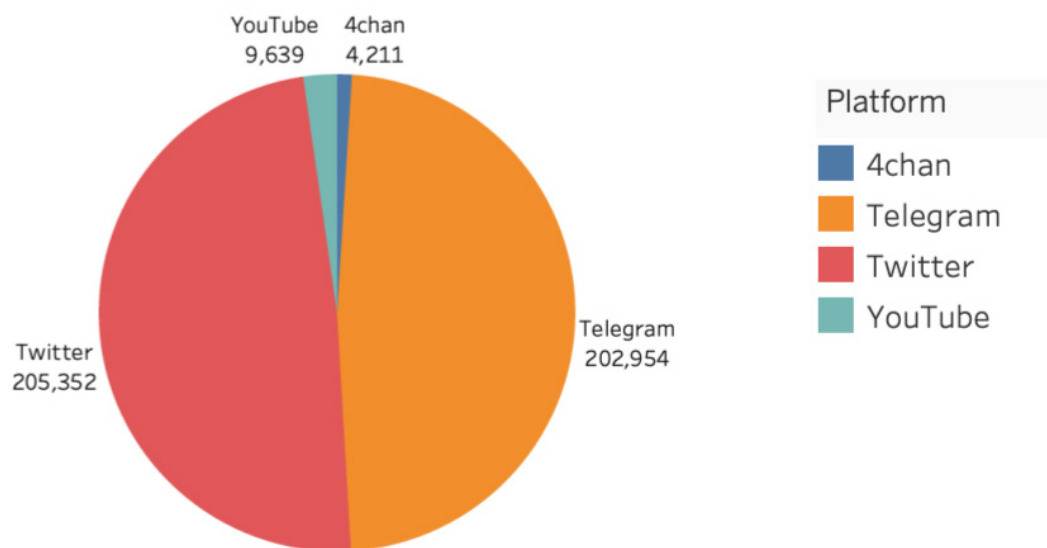


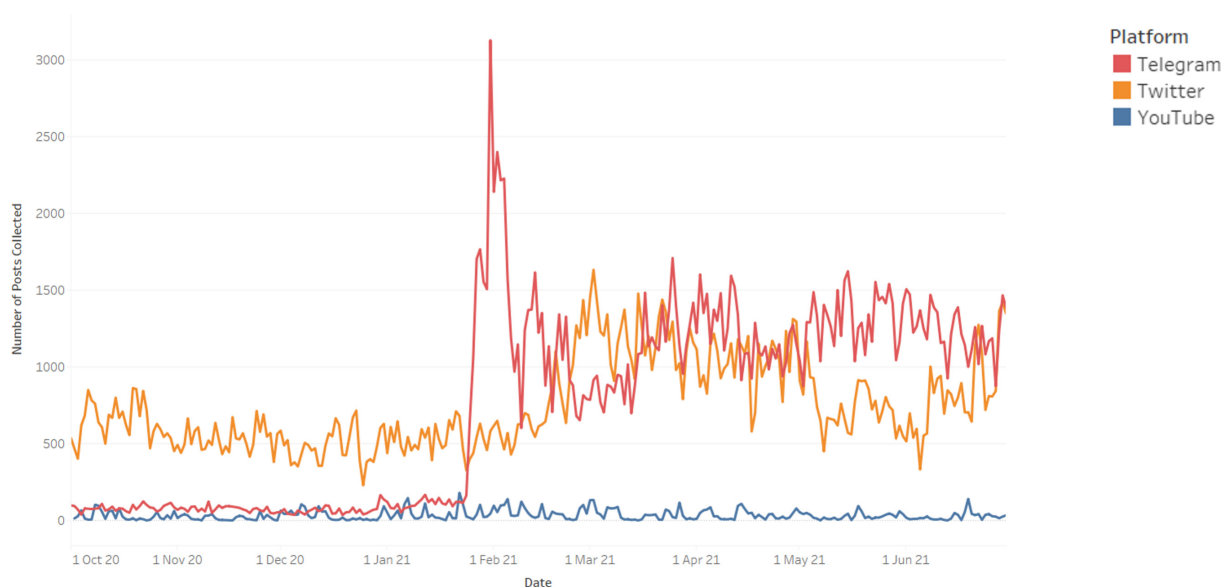
Figure 2: Volumes of Posts over Time



The breakdown of the 422,156 unique posts by platform shows that the dataset was heavily dominated by content from Twitter and Telegram. All of the unique posts collected for the analysis originated from online spaces which at some point over the collection period saw high volumes of content relevant to far-right narratives. This said, not every individual post was extreme in nature in the sense that it encouraged, supported or glorified violence. As this was not the focus of this study, we can not know if individual posters held far-right views, but we do know they all posted in confirmed ERW online spaces.

There was a substantial rise in engagement with ERW spaces online across all four platforms from January 2021. This peaked in February 2021, before stabilising at moderately fluctuating levels for the remainder of the period under review (Figure 1 and 2). The volume of total posts over time suggests that Telegram and Twitter played a far more facilitatory role than YouTube and 4chan in the proliferation of ERW content in Ireland (Figure 1). Indeed, 4chan was by far the least used social media platform, accounting for less than one percent of posts, followed by YouTube (two percent). Both Twitter and Telegram accounted for approximately 48 percent of posts each.

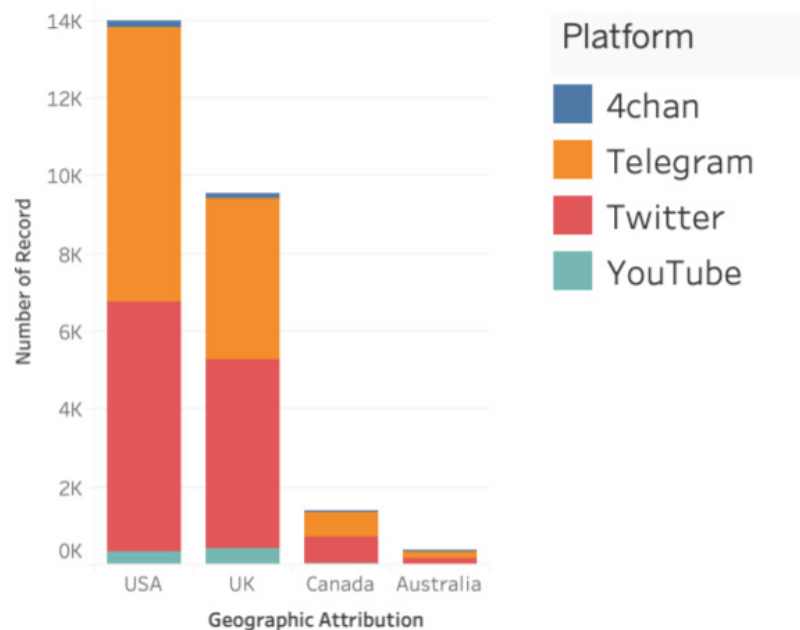
Figure 3: Volumes of Posts over Time by Platform



A further breakdown of raw volumes of posts over time shows how the surge in the volume of posts in January 2021 was driven primarily by activity on Telegram (Figure 2). Upon further inspection of the 162 far-right relevant spaces identified, one specific Telegram group was identified as being responsible for driving most of the surge from February 2021. The peak of activity from February can be attributed to one Telegram group. The fluctuations on Twitter seem to follow peaks and troughs on Telegram. This may suggest a dispersal from the more niche (Telegram) to more mainstream (Twitter) platforms.

Geographic Attribution and Contagion

Figure 4: Geographic Attribution of Posts

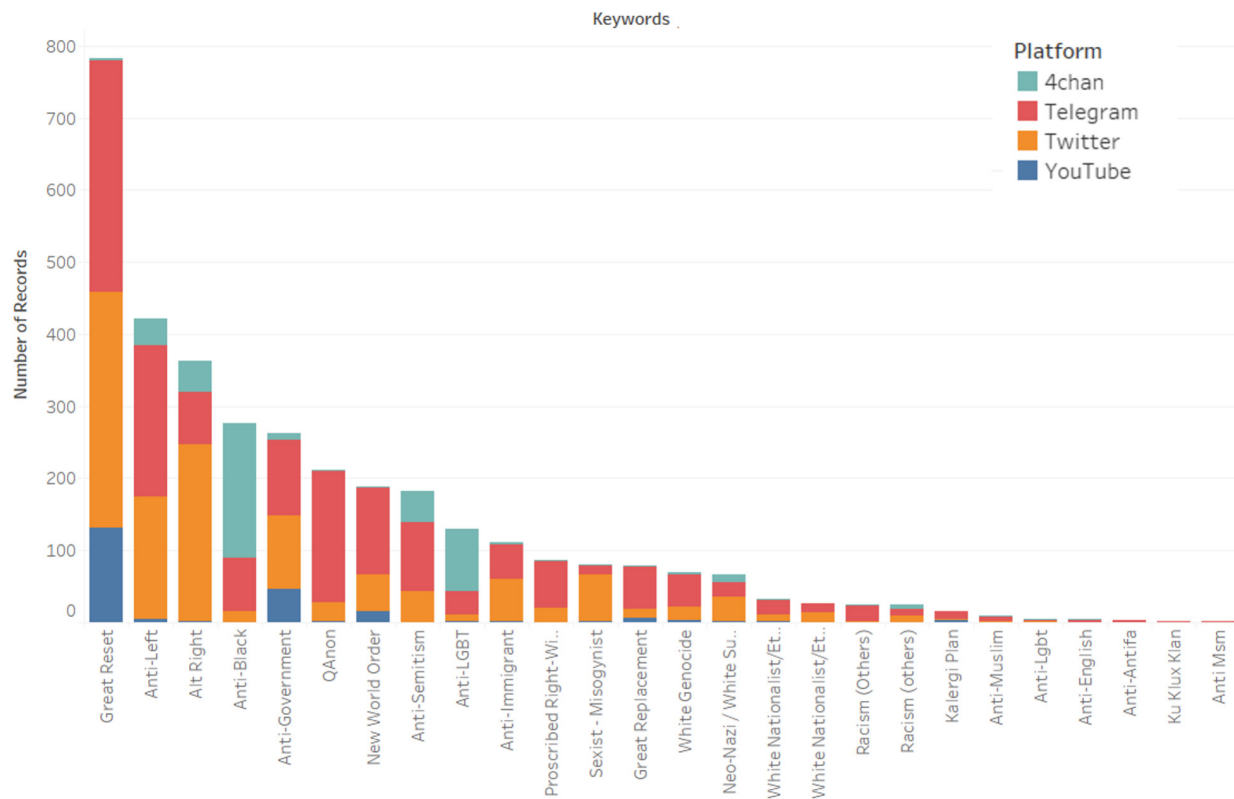


Understanding how ERW ideas might emerge in Ireland and where they emerge from, was of interest to this study. In terms of the individuals in question, 1,959 of the unique posts contained reference to at least one of the 77 influencer-specific keywords and this translated to 39 unique far-right influencers mentioned across all relevant spaces. In terms of where, the analysis revealed how countries other than Ireland were key parts of the discussion and vital to informing ERW narratives in *Irish* online spaces.⁶⁵

As such, whilst the online environment is borderless, and some far-right ideas are unique to specific environments, other ideas spread across national borders and emerge in various formats influenced by the local context. In order to understand how this happens and consider how the contagion of ERW ideas comes about, we searched geographic mentions within posts. Just under six percent ($N = 25,329$) of the 422,156 posts analysed provided reference to a location-related keyword. While there are limitations to this process, it gives an idea of the transnational linkages relevant to understanding the overall ecosystem.

The majority of geographical mentions were for the USA, which may be unsurprising considering the media coverage of alt-right protests and Donald Trump's presidency during this period. Indeed, mentions relevant to the USA were often not directly tied to Irish societal issues and politics, but rather focused on discussions surrounding Donald Trump, alt-right US influencers, QAnon and/or COVID-19 conspiracies in the USA. Mentions of the UK were often more directly tied to discussions of events in Ireland, such as comparisons on regional COVID-19 measures as well as criticism of British involvement in Ireland.

Figure 5: Thematic Breakdown of Posts



The breakdown of popular themes by platform suggests a general trend of conspiratorial content. “The Great Reset” was the most commonly discussed theme, across all platforms, except 4chan. YouTube posts were dominated by references to more common conspiracies, which often contain less overtly discriminatory messages, including the “Great Reset”, “New World Order” and other anti-government themes. The most prevalent themes on 4chan were more directly racist and violent in nature, and the greatest volume of violent sentiment targeting specific groups was observed, including against people who are left-wing, black, Jewish, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The greatest number of anti-black, antisemitic, and anti-LGBTQIA+ posts were found on 4chan, which is a peripheral and somewhat underground platform, and largely avoids censorship from regulators.

The key themes observed on Twitter and Telegram were similar: the Great Reset, followed by anti-left, alt-right (predominantly on Twitter) and anti-government. There was a much smaller anti-black sentiment on Twitter, a theme that was almost non-existent on YouTube. It is interesting, however, that misogynistic and anti-immigration sentiments were discussed more openly on Twitter.

Although the keyword tagging process has limitations, this data contributes to an understanding of the ERW ecosystem in Ireland and the differences and similarities between far-right sentiments in other countries. It has shown how different social media platforms host different views. The popular themes among these posts - The Great Reset, anti-left, alt-right, anti-black, and anti-government sentiment - are pillars of global far-right ideology. Additionally, location-based keyword tagging provides evidence that far-right discourse in these spaces is influenced by the events and environments in other countries, especially in the US. Although the far-right in Ireland manifests differently than in other contexts, ERW sentiment and global conspiracy theories abound in these online spaces.

Conclusion

The far-right ecosystem in Ireland is constructed differently than far-right ecosystems in other European contexts due to Ireland's political and cultural history. Therefore, it is difficult to compare the far-right in Ireland to other contexts. Although there is a longstanding belief that there is no far-right presence in Ireland because the country has so far avoided the presence of any successful far-right parties in national politics,⁶⁶ this article demonstrates that Irish far-right networks are using online platforms to build their base, discuss and disseminate misinformation, conspiracy theories, and divisive and discriminatory rhetoric.

Several commentaries have noted how, in the US, the alt-right has sought to influence “meta-politics, or how people think about politics” rather than change party politics. That is, the role of social media communications and physical protests is cultural change by ensuring people talk about the issues and mainstreaming and normalising ideologies of hate.⁶⁷ Translating this to the Irish case, while Irish far-right political parties may fail at the polls, social media platforms can be effective in spreading hate, which due to the mainstreaming effect, is often the primary objective of new online far-right networks. The evidence from this study demonstrates that the goal of the far-right in Ireland is to, if not succeed politically, succeed in influencing meta-politics in creating distrust in mainstream institutions and political parties. Like many of their ERW colleagues in Europe, mainstreaming ERW ideas is success in its own right.

This research shows that the ERW ecosystem in Ireland spans across online platforms, and while different platforms seem to attract different topics, the themes attracting the greatest attention are global conspiracy theories and anti-left, alt-right, anti-black, and anti-government sentiments. Many of these posts involved discourses surrounding far-right influencers, both Irish and international, as well as discussion of other countries, mainly the US but also the UK.

According to keyword tagging, YouTube was mainly dominated by conspiratorial content and content with an anti-government sentiment whereas themes such as anti-left, anti-black, and alt-right sentiment were largely popular on Twitter and Telegram. It is possible that people are exposed to conspiracy theory content on YouTube due to its widely acceptable content and more extremist content is then accessed on platforms with less restrictive community guidelines, like Twitter and Telegram.⁶⁸ It may be no coincidence that the most violent content was found on 4chan – the least regulated of the four platforms. This may suggest that regulatory frameworks can be an effective means of limiting harmful content, and displacing content to less popular social media sites can result in reducing the number of individuals engaging in harmful content. Indeed, some studies have suggested that such partial displacement can be an indicator of the more general effectiveness of the intervention.⁶⁹

The prevalent themes suggest that conspiracy theories are an important aspect of the Irish ERW ecosystem, given that keywords such as ‘the Great Replacement’ were prominent across platforms.⁷⁰ Conspiracy theories are an important tool for disseminating far-right ideology and, tapping into mainstream coverage and support. Many conspiracy theories seek to exploit relevant social issues and interpret them using a far-right framework. While some conspiracy theories may seem initially unrelated to far-right ideology on the surface (such as those surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic), they often contain elements of ethnonationalism at their core.⁷¹

In conclusion, there is a far-right presence in Ireland although it has not manifested in the same manner as in other jurisdictions. Although the far-right has yet to produce any party political successes, it does have its own burgeoning online ecosystem aimed towards creating division and spreading ideologies of hate. While the Irish national political system will likely prevent, for

now, a right-wing party from gaining significant support the potential harms via mainstreaming of racist, xenophobic and discriminatory ideas should not be underestimated. Not only have there been cases of far-right extremist violence in Ireland, but acts of violence perpetrated in the UK, USA, and elsewhere across Europe should highlight the dangers of complacency.⁷² Indeed, Bliuc and colleagues' systematic review of cyber-racism research concluded that online strategies, including those identified in this article, can potentially mobilise support for far-right ideologies, and increase recruitment for far-right groups.⁷³ As such, even if online discussions seldom translate into physical violence, or far-right political parties are kept away from government, the spread of ideologies of hate is sufficient justification for the state to pay attention to what is happening online.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study is exploratory in nature, it does provide points for future research. The keyword tagging process has limitations, including that it did not capture sentiment, so further research should take a more detailed or qualitative approach to the themes covered in these spaces. Additionally, since this data was collected in 2020 and 2021, it is likely that this data no longer represents current trends as accurately as the nature of ERW discourse is ever-changing. However, it does broach important questions for future research: firstly, especially in light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on far-right contagion, research should focus on how conspiracy theories are used as tools of dissemination by the online far-right in Ireland, especially in regards to current events. Secondly, the question of whether the Irish ERW ecosystem is influenced more by American far-right rhetoric than its European counterparts is of critical importance. Another question of importance is to what degree far-right discourse seems to cluster around or be driven by far-right influencers. Finally, although this study cannot draw any conclusions on the connection between online activity and real-world violent activism, future research must focus on how the online ERW spaces manifest offline, in Ireland and beyond.

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