

Platforming harm



THE CHALLENGE OF ALT TECH PLATFORMS

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Pricopi, A. C., & Cunningham, P. (2023, December). Social Network Analysis of Irish Covid-19 Interactions on Telegram. In 2023 31st Irish Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Cognitive Science (AICS) (pp. 1-8). IEEE.

Siapera, E. (2023). Alt Tech and the public sphere: Exploring Bitchute as a political media infrastructure. *European Journal of Communication*, 38(5), 446-465.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Platforming Harm project, funded by the Irish Research Council, sought to investigate the role of Alt Tech platforms in circulating harmful health narratives and their politicisation. Initially focused on Covid-19 sceptic groups, the project expanded its scope to include racist, anti-feminist, and anti-LGBTQ narratives, all considered harmful due to their opposition to fundamental rights and equality.

Moving beyond traditional misinformation paradigms, the project examines communication and storytelling strategies within Alt Tech platforms, understanding narratives as action-oriented ways of organising and representing information.

Key findings indicate that anti-vaccination narratives are attractive due to their blend of safety concerns, political conspiracy theories, and alternative health views, drawing individuals from diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. Understanding if and how these narratives travel between platforms and communities is crucial, as they can mutate and become more challenging to identify.

This white paper provides an overview of the project's key findings, including the identification of narrative contents in Alt Tech platforms, connections between disparate communities, and platform effects. In particular, it examines the narratives prevalent in alternative technology (Alt Tech) platforms, focusing on Telegram and Bitchute. The methodology combines topic modeling with qualitative discourse and content analysis to identify and illustrate key narratives from March 2020 to June 2023.

The study highlights three main narratives: Covid-19 scepticism, anti-gender, and anti-migration. Covid-19 scepticism revolves around distrust in official narratives, with concerns about vaccines, masks, and government control. The anti-gender narrative rejects gender fluidity and advocates for traditional gender roles, often intertwining with nationalist and nativist ideologies. Similarly, the anti-migration narrative emphasises a return to traditional values and criticises 'globalist' policies, blaming immigration for societal challenges.

Connections between these narratives are illustrated through mind maps, revealing overlaps in themes like depopulation and protection of children. Despite these connections, the study finds that far-right ideologies are not dominant within Covid-19 sceptic groups but are present only in some clusters. Similarly, wellness communities show limited migration towards far-right ideologies over time, suggesting persistent adherence to fundamental wellness narratives.

Our research extends to influencer behaviour across platforms, particularly focusing on ideological entrepreneurs who sustain themselves professionally through online political content. Bitchute emerges as a platform for far-right content creators, supporting the propagation of extremist ideologies. However, some creators adapt their content strategies to avoid overtly political topics, in order to remain on mainstream platforms like YouTube while also building an audience/user base in Alt Tech platforms.

Overall, our research underscores the role of Alt Tech platforms in shaping digital discourse and amplifying fringe viewpoints. It emphasises the need for comprehensive media literacy initiatives and a nuanced understanding of platform dynamics and influencer strategies to address the proliferation of far-right influences in online spaces.

Recommendations

1. Enhance media literacy initiatives to empower users to critically evaluate information and resist extremist narratives.

2. Implement more targeted content moderation policies on platforms like Telegram to curb the spread of harmful ideologies.
3. Foster dialogue and cooperation between tech companies, researchers, and policymakers to address the challenges posed by extremist content on alternative social media platforms.

Future Directions

Further research is needed to monitor the evolving dynamics between Covid-19 protest groups and the far right on Telegram and to assess the effectiveness of interventions aimed at mitigating far-right influences. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide insights into the long-term impact of these movements on society and democracy.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic brought about unprecedented societal changes globally, including in Ireland. As the government enforced lockdowns and other measures to curb the spread of the virus, dissent began to emerge, particularly on social media platforms like Telegram. Over time, these dissenting voices evolved into organized protests, shifting focus from lockdowns to issues such as mask mandates and vaccinations. In this sense, the Covid-19 pandemic not only posed a public health crisis but also sparked socio-political movements worldwide. In Ireland, as elsewhere, dissent against official measures found a platform on Telegram, leading to the formation of protest groups. Concerns arose regarding the presence of far-right ideologies within these groups, prompting scrutiny into their connections and influences. It is in this context that the project Platforming Harm

received funding in order to understand the role of Alt Tech platforms and the activities of users in these platforms. The project received funding by the Irish Research Council under the Coalesce 2A strand, and it constituted a collaboration between Professor Eugenia Siapera and Professor Pádraig Cunningham, with the support of Martina Chapman from Media Literacy Ireland. In this introduction, we outline the project approach and research questions.

In particular the project was concerned with the creation and circulation of potentially harmful health narratives; the politicisation of these narratives and the polarization this entails; their circulation in both mainstream and Alt-Tech platforms. We use the term harmful health narratives to refer to ideas and views that go against medical consensus, are unsubstantiated and lacking in support through empirical evidence. Because they go against medical advice and are unproven they are likely to harm those who may follow their advice (Bursztyn et al., 2020). In using the term politicisation, we refer to the ways in which these narratives are using ideas and concepts from the sphere of politics and create associations that did not exist before. We consider these associations as key indicators of weaponisation, that is, of ways in which narratives are used against opponents. For example, the politicisation of the science behind the Covid-19 response and potential vaccination programmes turns a scientific question into a political one. While there are political questions involved in science, its evaluation as valid or not is based on very different epistemological criteria to those in the political sphere.

The project uses harmful health narratives as a key entry point into the world of Alt Tech platforms. The overall aim of the research is to understand how these platforms operate, the narratives that circulate in them, as well as the semantic and other connections between groups/communities that in the first instance appear unconnected. We hope that this research will lead not only to a better understanding of how communities may coalesce around harmful contents but also to the development of strategies to redress the harm and While therefore we began with Covid-19 sceptic groups, the research encountered a variety of other narratives that can be labelled harmful or toxic. In particular, we

encountered and focused on racist, anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ narratives. We consider these narratives to be harmful in that they are looking to scale back important gains for racialised communities, women and the LGBTQ community striving for equality. In addition they are formulated in clear opposition to fundamental rights, as expressed for example in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

Secondly, the research in this project sought to move beyond the misinformation and disinformation paradigm, which typically focuses on facts and the veracity of information. Useful as this paradigm may be, we are more interested in communication and story-telling strategies used as these tend to be relatively overlooked in the misinformation paradigm. In short, we are interested in the more complex ways in which information and communication are bound together as narratives. We therefore focused on narratives in Alt Tech platforms, which we understand here as action-oriented ways of organising and representing information and events, positing connections between them that lead to some actions and precluding others (cf DeFina and Georgakopoulou, 2015)¹.

Because communication constitutes an important form of power (Castells, 2013) it becomes a focal arena of struggle of narratives for visibility and dominance. To understand this struggle for visibility and dominance, it is important to understand the communication ecosystem, the relationship between platforms, and the 'division of labour' between platforms, or in other words, what each platform is used for by certain actors. Mainstream platforms such as Facebook and YouTube are adopting measures to address misinformation at least in part as a result of regulation, such as the Audiovisual Media Services Directive and the Digital Services Act in the European Union. This has triggered an exodus or a purge of accounts that had been associated with far right actors and mis/disinformation. This purge has diverted traffic and content from the mainstream to the alternative platforms that take a different, more lax, approach to content moderation. At the same time however, the political objective for these accounts is to be able to reach and persuade broader publics, the

¹ De Fina, Anna, and Alexandra Georgakopoulou. *The handbook of narrative analysis*. John Wiley & Sons, 2015.

so-called 'red-pilling'. It is inevitable therefore that they will seek to pursue tactics that allow their content to travel.

A key research finding is that anti-vaccination narratives are more attractive because they cover an array of topics, blending safety concerns, political conspiracy theories and alternative medicine and health; in this manner they can attract individuals from a diverse background and with diverse views (Johnson et al., 2020). It is this dimension that we consider central in our research. While Johnson et al. looked at networks, their growth and centrality, proposing interventions that can limit them, we contend that for any such intervention to be successful the contents that circulate in these networks and their thematic associations are key, firstly because they can attract diverse individuals and secondly because the narratives can mutate and therefore become more difficult to identify. Exploring how narratives 'travel' between platforms as well as between different communities is therefore a key part of the research.

Taking the above into account, this white paper aims to provide an overview of some of the key findings of the Platforming Harm project focusing on (i) identifying narrative contents in Alt Tech platforms; (ii) identifying connections between apparently disparate communities; (iii) identifying platform effects. It will subsequently use these findings to make a set of recommendations for addressing the challenges posed by Alt Tech Platforms and the contents they support.

ALT TECH NARRATIVES

The methodological approach we used to identify narratives was a combination of topic modelling and qualitative discourse and content analysis. For this part of the analysis, we focus on Telegram. To collect data, we began with a set of seed accounts of Covid-19 sceptic groups and snowballed from there. The narratives we focus on revolve around Covid-19, anti-gender (including anti-LGBTQ) and anti-migration

narratives. We used mind maps to illustrate the narratives and their connecting points. The analyses here are based on data collected from Telegram between March 2020 and June 2023, and on data collected from influencer accounts on Bitchute between January and June 2023.

Covid-19

While there were differences between different groups as can be seen in Fig 1, the overarching narrative was shared by all Covid groups. In short, this narrative is characterised by a common thread of scepticism, rooted in distrust and apprehension.

At the heart of this scepticism lies the belief that the pandemic is an orchestrated crisis possibly designed to serve hidden agendas of control and power. Drawing parallels to authoritarian regimes of the past, the narrative questions the severity of Covid-19 and suggests it may be exploited by governments and elites to tighten their grip on society.



Fig 1 Word clouds of terms in different Telegram clusters. Source: Curley, Siapera and Carthy, 2022.

Two topics are at the heart of the narrative: the safety of the vaccines and the effectiveness and safety of masks. While health authorities advocate for their widespread use, sceptics raise concerns about potential risks associated with both vaccine and masks, including death, immune suppression and increased susceptibility to other illnesses. This scepticism highlights a broader mistrust of official guidance and narratives. Vaccines are linked to 5G technology, and seen as tools for population control. Speculative theories add weight to these concerns, prompting calls for greater scrutiny and accountability. Scientific arguments are marshalled against measures like lockdowns, using statistics and appeals to reason to challenge the justification for restrictions on individual freedoms. This narrative includes broader anti globalist sentiments, highlighting a distrust of supranational entities and their perceived interference in national affairs. Doubts extend to authoritative health organisations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), questioning the accuracy and transparency of their messaging. A notable element of the narrative is the focus on children, whose health and well-being is seen as compromised by lockdowns, vaccines and masks.

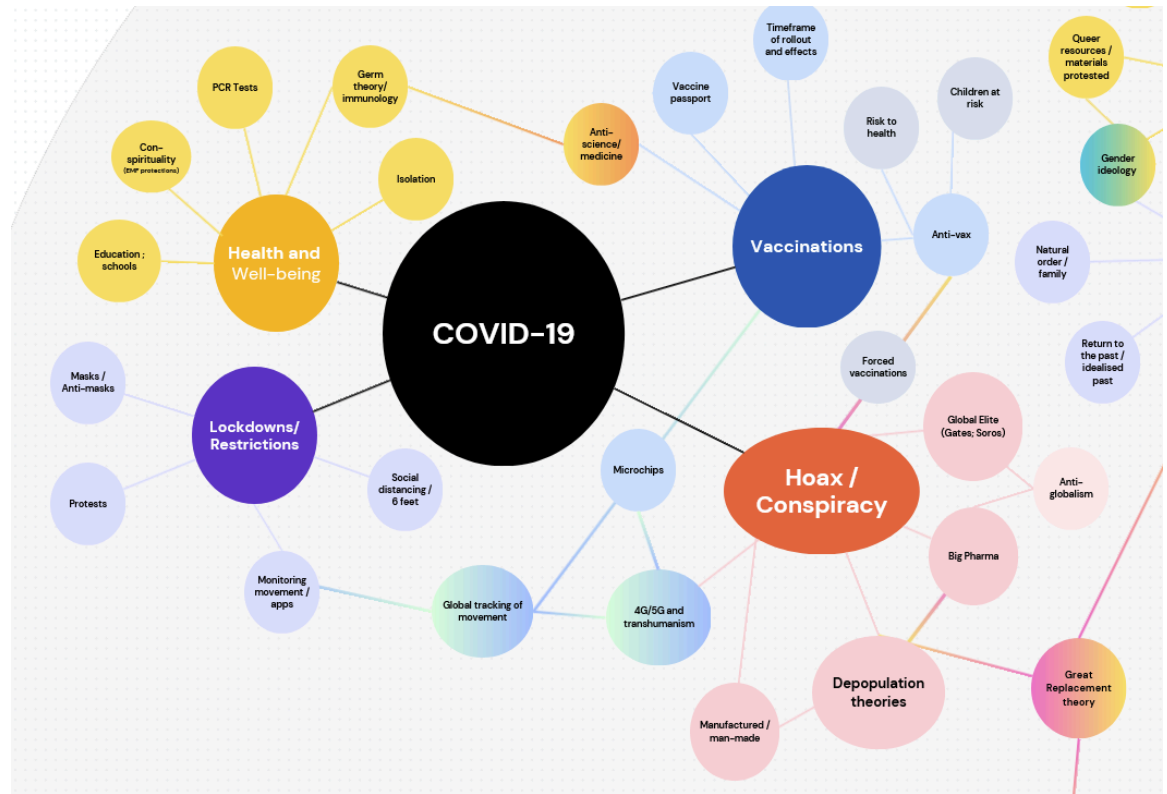


Fig 2 Covid-19 Mind map

The map on Fig 2 illustrates the connections between the various parts of the narrative, with the aim to visually apprehend how associations are made. For instance, we see concerns about vaccinations linked to what are seen as illiberal measures (vaccine passports, compulsory vaccinations) linked to global elites plotting against the people, Big Pharma, and depopulation theories. While the first part may qualify as legitimate criticism, the second part is baseless and the connection is arbitrary. As we will see below, the node on depopulation links this narrative to the ones on anti-gender and anti-migration/racist narratives examined below.

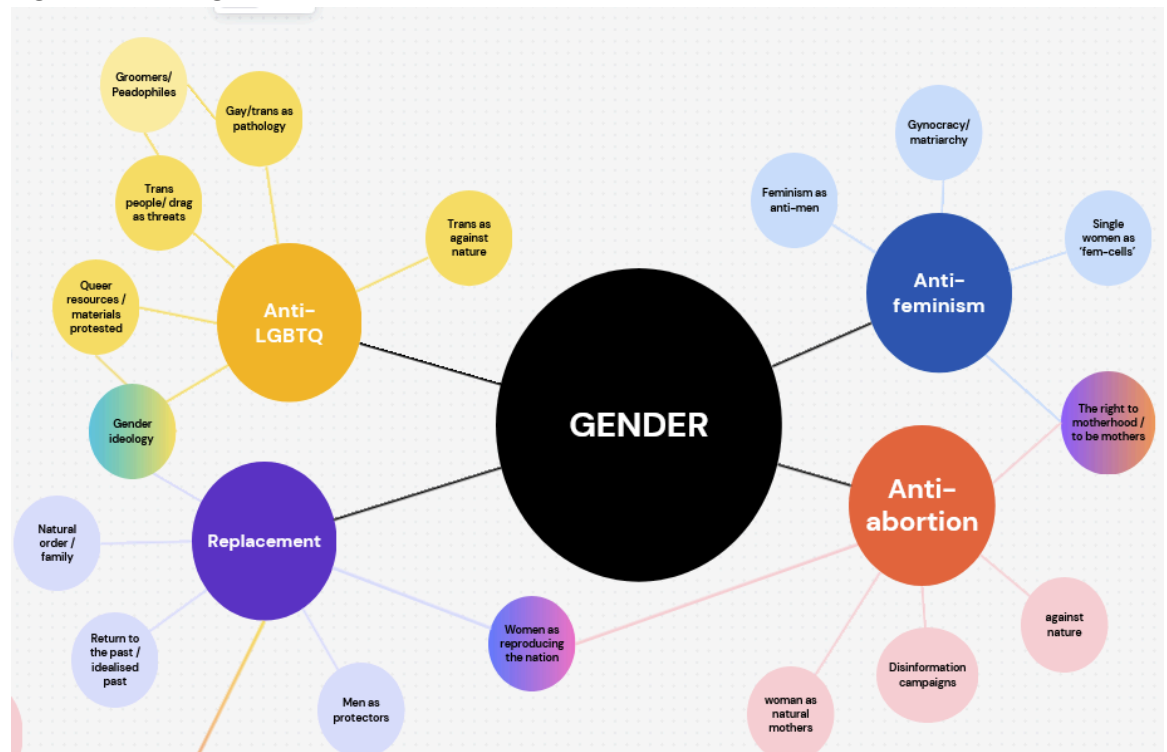
Anti-Gender

This narrative criticises the idea of a separation between gender and biological sex, positing that biological sex determines who men and women are. Any deviations from stereotypical binary heteronormative

gender roles are unnatural and defy the inherent inclinations of men and women. At the heart of this narrative lies a biological reductionism that seeks to enforce strict adherence to traditional gender norms. Anything beyond these norms is deemed unnatural, threatening the fabric of society.

This narrative elevates what it refers to as 'gender ideology' as a dominant mainstream view of gender. This fuzzy construct allows disparate groups to coalesce under an agenda that opposes gender equality. The narrative on gender is intricately linked to race and class dynamics, drawing on historical references to reinforce the perceived natural order. Central to this narrative is the push for a return to 'natalist' views, promoting the idea that women's primary role is to reproduce for the nation. Emphasis is placed on demographic decline, 'depopulation', framing women's reproductive duties as essential for the survival of the race. Furthermore, women are expected to prioritise their roles as homemakers within heterosexual Irish families, perpetuating traditional family structures.

Figure 3 Anti-gender mind map



References to history and the past are used as proof of the natural order, reinforcing the idea that deviation from traditional gender roles is aberrant. Transgressors are routinely othered, depicted as pathological, evil, or ugly, in an attempt to discredit their defiance of societal norms. The narrative warns against the perceived dangers of gender 'wokeness,' framing it as a threat to societal stability and traditional values. It advocates for resistance, urging individuals to challenge the perceived encroachment of gender ideology and fight back against what is deemed a perversion of natural order. In essence, the anti-gender narrative serves as a rallying cry for those who oppose progressive views on gender equality, invoking historical tropes and racialized rhetoric to uphold traditional gender norms and societal hierarchies.

Anti-Migration

As we saw above, the anti-migration narrative is closely linked to the anti-gender narrative and posits a return to traditional values that define the nation. The narrative contains a critique of what it construes as a decline in traditional values and societal norms, especially regarding family structures and gender dynamics, both in Ireland and the Western world at large. It expresses concern over declining birth rates in Western nations, attributing it to various socio-economic factors, including feminism, lack of affordable housing, and career pressures. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of motherhood and traditional gender roles, advocating for stay-at-home mothers and the prioritisation of family over career. This traditionalism is contrasted with the individualism and liberalism of the present, idealising a simpler and more wholesome era characterised by traditional family structures and societal cohesion. This social cohesion in turn is seen as in danger because of 'mass immigration'. The narrative contends that Ireland's housing crisis stems from decades of mass immigration facilitated by 'globalist-oriented' Irish governments. The housing shortage is exacerbated by immigrant prioritisation over indigenous Irish citizens on social housing lists. The narrative positions nationalism as a means to assert sovereignty and cultural identity. It argues for the preservation of Irish sovereignty against foreign influences and decries the encroachment of multiculturalism on

indigenous populations. It blames globalist policies for undermining national sovereignty and perpetuating socio-economic challenges, including housing shortages and immigration-related wage suppression. It sees globalism as eroding cultural values and promoting ideologies such as LGBTQ advocacy.

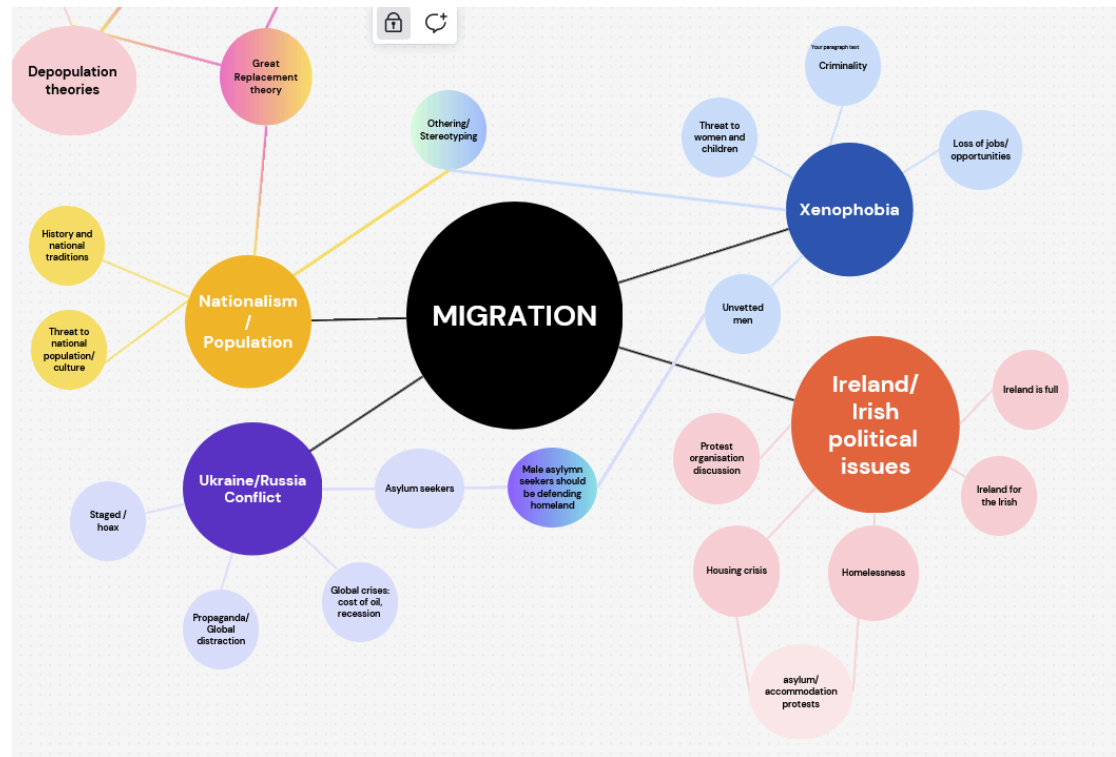


Figure 4 Anti-migration mind map

As a solution, it advocates for nationalist governance characterised by immigration control, and prioritisation of Irish citizens in housing and job markets. It emphasises the need to minimise immigration to essential roles and deport illegal immigrants. It argues for economic protectionism to safeguard Irish jobs and housing opportunities for native citizens. Multinational corporations are criticised for exploiting immigration to drive down wages and housing affordability for Irish nationals. The narrative invokes Ireland's historical struggle for independence and suggests that embracing its version of nationalism can safeguard the nation's cultural heritage and ensure socio-economic prosperity for its citizens.

[illegible]

mono-cultural past and white European supremacy, and other extremist movements, such as the incel movement, and its belief in a patriarchal past where men were empowered, fulfilled and leading the social hierarchy . We consider reactionary politics as profoundly anti-democratic as it is explicitly oriented against a politics of equality that is inscribed in most (European) constitutions and in the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. While semantically the three mind maps are clearly connected, the question that arises is how common are these narratives in these groups. In particular, we are interested in exploring whether the reactionary anti-gender and anti-migration narratives are encountered in Covid sceptic and other health related groups. This is explored in the next section.

COMMUNITY OVERLAPS

How much influence do far-right organisations have on the narratives of Covid-19 scepticism? What's the relationship between Covid-19 sceptic groups and far-right ideologies? Are these movements separate, or have they merged into one? As Covid-19 sceptics were deplatformed or saw their contents 'demoted' or their circulation reduced (see Siapera, 2022)³, Alt Tech platforms were seen as a more attractive environment to connect with similar others and exchange information seen as 'censored' from the main platforms. But since Alt Tech platforms are known to host far right context, would this exposure 'radicalise' communities such as those in Covid sceptic groups? If this were the case, then deplatforming could be seen as having unwelcome side effects. These are therefore important questions and we used two case studies to approach them. The first is focusing on Covid specifically and the second is exploring wellness communities and the extent to which the far right has 'infiltrated' them.

To examine whether far-right ideologies are prevalent within Covid-19 Telegram groups, the research by Curley, Siapera and Carthy (2022)⁴

³ Siapera, E. (2022). Platform governance and the "infodemic". *Javnost-The Public*, 29(2), 197-214.

⁴ Curley, C., Siapera, E., & Carthy, J. (2022). Covid-19 protesters and the far right on Telegram: Co-conspirators or accidental bedfellows?. *Social Media+ Society*, 8(4), 20563051221129187.

sought to identify terms and phrases unrelated to Covid and connected to far right narratives. Phrases connected to the far right were identified using the database Hatebase. In line with expectations, most Covid-19



Figure 6, taken from Curley, Siapera and Carthy, 2022

Telegram groups predominantly feature discussions revolving around topics like vaccines and related conspiracy theories. However, a noteworthy departure is observed in a particular cluster, where terms commonly associated with far-right narratives, such as "asylum seekers," "kalergi plan," and "mass migration," are prominent. This finding indicates the presence of far right narratives in at least part of the Covid-related groups but does not support a convergence of far-right ideologies with Covid-19 scepticism.

We further used topic modelling to go deeper into the content of these groups. Despite the presence of far-right terminology within one of the groups, the broader landscape of Covid-sceptic Telegram groups reveals a modest incidence of such terms. This suggests that while there is a discernible presence of far-right discourse, it remains largely concentrated

within a specific subgroup rather than being pervasive across all Covid-19 Telegram groups. Figure 6 below represents these findings schematically. The coloured circles represent different Covid-sceptic groups. As the graph shows, terms found in the Hatebase database, combined with our own labelling, are prevalent only in one of the groups, the light-blue 'Resistance' group. We therefore concluded that while the presence of far-right terms indicates some level of overlap, the overall narrative remains distinct, suggesting that the convergence of these two movements is limited.

A second paper by Pricopi and Cunningham (2023)⁵ examined the hypothesis of a 'pipeline' connecting wellness to far right groups across time. In particular, the research used social network analysis of Covid-19 related groups on Telegram to examine if there was a shift from Covid-19 to the far right, which would be consistent with radicalisation. In particular, the study categorised Irish Telegram users into four main groups: wellness, far-right, conspiracies, or none of the above. By starting with Covid-focused Irish groups, the aim sought to explore their interactions with other groups and channels, the formation of communities, and their evolution over time through social network analysis (SNA).

⁵ Pricopi, A. C., & Cunningham, P. (2023, December). Social Network Analysis of Irish Covid-19 Interactions on Telegram. In 2023 31st Irish Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Cognitive Science (AICS) (pp. 1-8). IEEE.

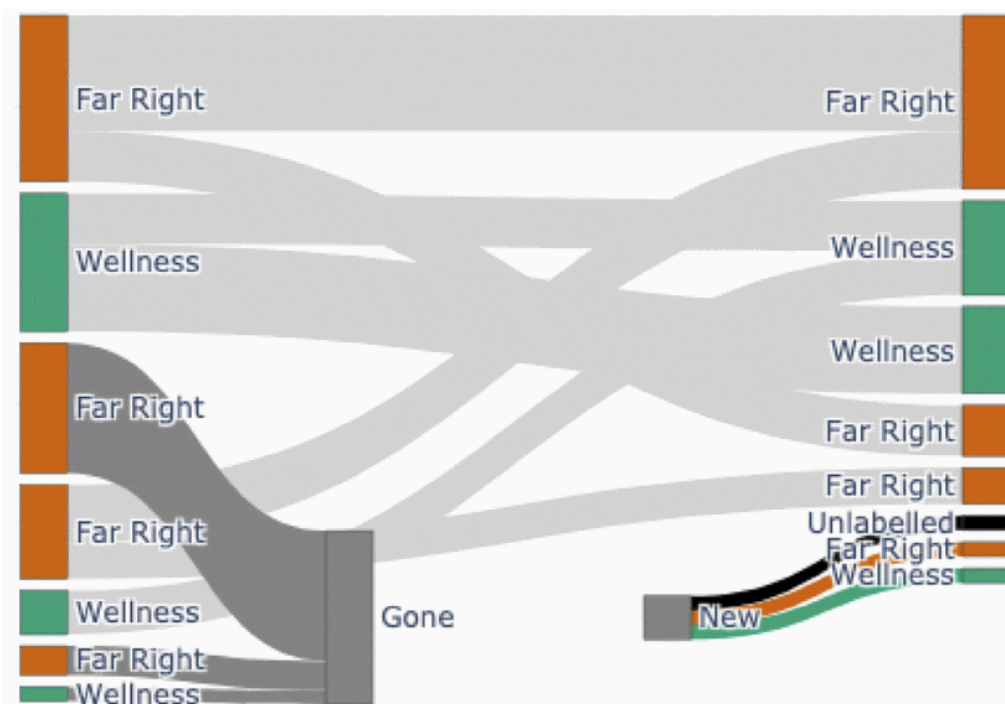


Figure 7 Evolution of semantically linked communities over 6 months (2021) taken from Pricopi and Cunningham (2023).

The key findings of this study indicate that while some nodes from "wellness" communities shifted towards far-right ones, the majority remained within wellness communities, indicating a persistent adherence to fundamental wellness narratives. Figure 7 represents schematically the connections between the communities in a period of six months in 2021. As it is clear in the Figure, there is limited movement from wellness to the far right as the communities remain separate. Thus, contrary to the notion that wellness communities become radicalised on alternative platforms, the findings suggest otherwise for Irish communities. While far-right narratives were widespread, wellness communities did not merge with far-right ones by the end of 2021. However, the communities showed a tendency to become more heterogeneous over time, hinting at a potential gradual blending of narratives and ideologies.

While far-right ideologies are present within Covid-19 protest groups on Telegram, they do not dominate the narrative. These studies suggest a window for action to prevent the further entrenchment of far-right influences. In this context, we emphasise the importance of media literacy initiatives, especially those going beyond the heuristic methods of fact

checking and source identification. At the same time, notwithstanding the parallel coexistence of Covid-19 sceptic groups and far right groups, one of the key finding of Curley et al. (2022) was that some of the actors in far right groups were significantly more active in posting contents. This led to our research focusing on some of the more active individuals, who often operate as influencers of the far right.

INFLUENCERS WITHIN AND ACROSS PLATFORMS

A final area that our project sought to elucidate concerned the role of individuals who play more active roles than average platform users. In particular, we noted earlier that Alt Tech emerged after the 'deplatforming' of key actors and accounts, which then moved to these spaces as they imposed fewer controls over content. Two questions emerge here: how do Alt Tech platforms engage with these key individuals, and secondly, how do these individuals behave across platforms. The research here understands these individuals as operating as 'ideological entrepreneurs' (Finlayson, 2022)⁶. An ideological entrepreneur can be defined as an influencer who builds their own distinct political personality or 'brand'. Using this brand, they then directly market and sell their ideologies to various audiences, which they actively seek, nurture, and maintain. Unlike traditional political figures who rely on party affiliation or institutional support, ideological entrepreneurs operate independently, allowing them to sustain themselves professionally solely through their political contents online. When therefore YouTube and other mainstream platforms began removing accounts in the famous 'deplatforming' (Rogers, 2021)⁷ these political influencers did not only lose an audience but also their livelihood. It is in this context that we sought to explore how Alt Tech platforms interact with influencers and how influencers use different platforms.

⁶ Finlayson, A. (2022). YouTube and political ideologies: Technology, populism and rhetorical form. *Political Studies*, 70(1), 62-80.

⁷ Rogers, R. (2020). Deplatforming: Following extreme Internet celebrities to Telegram and alternative social media. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(3), 213-229.

Our research here sought to investigate the environment and structure provided by Bitchute, exploring how it influences users and its potential impact on the digital public sphere. The findings indicate that Bitchute serves as a media infrastructure for far-right content creators, incentivising and supporting the continuous production of content that propagates far-right ideologies, shaping a new common sense around politicised cultural issues. This dynamic parallels Habermas' notion of the refeudalization of the public sphere, where editorials, rather than news, become the selling point, and editors transformed from 'merchants of news' to 'dealers in public opinion.'

Our research analysed the platform affordances, as well as the practices of three European content creators on Bitchute, highlighting their far-right leanings and focus on cultural and political issues. The analysis reveals that Bitchute's structure supports content creators focusing on conspiracies, anti-Semitic narratives, and culture wars. The platform predominantly hosts US-based content, often supporting Republican positions and criticising Democrats and liberal figures. Additionally, Bitchute hosts more extreme content, including neo-Nazi films and discussions on topics like transhumanism and central bank digital currency.

To illustrate these points, our research examined three creators, noting their far-right affiliations and engagement levels on Bitchute. Despite bans from mainstream platforms, these creators continue to produce content catering to far-right audiences. They emphasise cultural and political issues, often taking ultra-conservative stances against multiculturalism, feminism, and "woke" ideologies. Examining these creators sheds light on the prevalent themes and tactics employed within Bitchute's ecosystem. Paul Joseph Watson, a figure associated with InfoWars, has a substantial following with a focus on cultural and political issues. Computing Forever, an Irish based influencer, offers a diverse content mix including film reviews and cultural critiques, while Mark Collett, founder of a far-right British party, propagates white nationalist ideologies. Additionally, they engage with political topics like climate change and censorship, reflecting a consistent ultra-conservative stance. We understand the work

undertaken by these influencers in terms of Philippe Corcuff's (2021)⁸ framework of far-right discursive formations—ultraconservatism, confusionism, and identitarianism. Ultraconservatism manifests in racist and anti-gender discourses, while confusionism encompasses conspiratorial narratives and critiques of government policies. Finally, identitarianism fosters a sense of closed, homogeneous identity, contrasting with perceived threats from progressive movements.

In essence, the examination of these content creators on Bitchute underscores the platform's role in perpetuating polarising discourse and challenging mainstream narratives. Through their content strategies and engagement with divisive topics, these creators contribute to the shaping of digital public discourse, amplifying fringe viewpoints within an alternative media landscape. Overall, our research suggests that Bitchute serves as an infrastructure for the far right, providing a stable environment for content creators and fostering ideological entrepreneurship. This structural transformation of the public sphere contributes to the proliferation and consolidation of far-right political actors, shaping digital discourse and intensifying competition among ideological entrepreneurs for audience engagement and financial support.

The second article here provides an in-depth comparison of the content uploaded by a single creator across three different platforms: Telegram, YouTube, and Bitchute. The data reveals variations in the prevalence and intensity of extremist content, with Telegram emerging as the platform with the most extreme discourse, particularly evident in discussions related to gender, sexuality, immigration, and Covid-19 scepticism. These topics often incorporate anti-immigration rhetoric, conspiracy theories, and resistance to mainstream narratives.

Using the BERT topic modelling method, our analysis underscores the prominence of far-right themes within the Telegram data, including

⁸ Corcuff, P. (2021). *La grande confusion: Comment l'extrême-droite gagne la bataille des idées?*. Éditions Textuel.

concerns about transgender and queer indoctrination in schools, the perceived threat of drag queens interacting with children, anti-immigration sentiments, and scepticism towards Covid-19 and vaccines. Furthermore, discussions on immigration occasionally intersect with the Russia-Ukraine conflict, raising questions about the legitimacy of Ukrainian refugees.

Alt-health topics and Covid-19 scepticism are prevalent across all three platforms, particularly on Telegram, where discussions challenge mainstream scientific narratives and promote alternative healing modalities. References to electromagnetic fields (EMFs) and conspiracy theories about Covid-19 vaccines are notable examples, alongside endorsements of 'conspiritual' healers and health influencers.

While Bitchute is often associated with far-right content, the analysis reveals a more nuanced picture. Although references to far-right buzzwords like "woke(ness)" are present, the creator channel we focused on primarily features moderate content, such as media reviews. This may be due to the fact that the creator under study chose to prioritise his YouTube channel as this may earn him more followers and more revenue. As the creator's channel was previously banned by YouTube, the creator shifted his contents towards less overtly political topics, focusing instead on film criticism. Rather than operating two separate video channels, the creator may have preferred to post the same video content across both video platforms, taking advantage of an economy of scale. More broadly, cross-platform usage enables ideological entrepreneurs to reach diverse audiences. This strategy capitalises on the broad reach of mainstream platforms like YouTube while maintaining a presence on alternative platforms like Bitchute and Telegram.

In this line of research, we identified the interaction between platform dynamics and influencer strategies in a broader platform ecosystem. Influencers that operate as ideological entrepreneurs are motivated and incentivised both politically and economically to reach as many users as possible and to employ strategies that allow them to remain with one foot

on mainstream platforms while expanding and consolidating their followers across the wider ecosystem. From a policy perspective therefore it is important to consider the whole platform ecosystem and the operations of key individuals across platforms.

CONCLUSION

This report provides a summary of some of the key findings of the research project Platforming Harm. The report looks into the multifaceted landscape of socio-political movements and harmful health narratives emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly focusing on their proliferation on alternative technology (Alt Tech) platforms Telegram and Bitchute and exploring the intersections between health narratives and reactionary politics. The conclusions drawn from the research shed light on several critical aspects:

1. Identification of Key Narrative Themes: Through a combination of topic modeling and qualitative analysis, the research identified prevalent harmful health narratives, including scepticism towards Covid-19, anti-gender positions, and anti-migration rhetoric. These narratives often intertwine with broader political ideologies and historical references to reinforce societal norms and hierarchies.
2. Limited Convergence of Far-Right Ideologies with Covid-19 Scepticism: While far-right ideologies are present within Covid-19 skeptic groups on Telegram, our research suggests that their dominance in these narratives is limited. Despite overlaps, far-right discourse remains concentrated within specific subgroups, indicating a distinct narrative trajectory for Covid-19 scepticism but also, crucially, the possibility for interventions to engage with these users.
3. Influence of Ideological Entrepreneurs: Our research highlights the role of ideological entrepreneurs in shaping and disseminating far-right 'anti-woke' narratives. These influencers operate independently of political parties, leveraging platform dynamics to reach diverse audiences and propagate anti-migration, anti-women and anti-LGBTQ viewpoints.

4. Platform Dynamics and Influencer Strategies: Our analysis underscores the interplay between platform affordances and influencer strategies, with ideological entrepreneurs adapting their content to suit different platforms while maintaining a presence across the ecosystem. This cross-platform approach allows them to maximise audience reach and engagement.

Overall, the research underscores the complex interrelationships between harmful health narratives, political ideologies, and digital platforms, emphasising the need for nuanced strategies to address the challenges posed by Alt Tech platforms and their influence on public discourse. Additionally, the findings highlight the importance of media literacy initiatives and comprehensive approaches to understanding platform dynamics and influencer behavior in the digital age.