

## **MAINSTREAMING THE FAR-RIGHT: DEPLATFORMING, CONTENT MODERATION AND FAR-RIGHT PRESENCE ON MAINSTREAM SOCIAL MEDIA SITES**

Sarah Anne Dunne

/ University College Dublin, Ireland

Eugenia Siapera

/ University College Dublin, Ireland

“I’m Jewish, and there’s a set of people who deny that the Holocaust happened. I find that deeply offensive. But at the end of the day, I don’t believe that our platform should take that down because I think there are things that different people get wrong.”

– Mark Zuckerberg.

In 2018, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg controversially announced the right of Holocaust deniers to share their opinions online (Klein, 2018). The comment produced immediate outrage, garnered a paltry apology, and revealed the realities of online moderation and platform governance. While there are understandable and complex nuances behind platform governance policies and, particularly, moderation policies that can result in deplatforming, Zuckerberg’s comment pointed to a deeper problem: that platform moderation was indelibly linked to the fact that social media platforms like Facebook remain, first and foremost, capitalist machines. As Zuckerberg went on to note: “The principles we have on what we remove from [Facebook] are: if it’s going to result in real harm, real physical harm,

or if you're attacking individuals, then that content shouldn't be on the platform' (Klein, 2018). Regardless of the ignorance behind such a comment and the undermining of online harm and digital violence, such a response (perhaps unsurprisingly) fails to account for the harm produced by groups often behind such content: white supremacists, antisemitic groups, and Nazi-apologists (among other extremist ideologues) produce this historical revisionism as a means of targeting Jewish communities and justifying Nazi propaganda and ideology (Cohen-Almagor, 2016). For companies like META, this points to an ideological blind-spot that refutes the realities of antisemitic hate speech (Guhl & Davey, 2020); an issue that traverses both antisemitism and social network platforms more broadly. Indeed, despite ongoing demands for policies and moderation that protects users from abuse and deplatforming actions taken by mainstream social media sites (MSMs), a growing body of work depicts the proliferation of extremist channels, including anti-LGBTQ+ and racist groups across these sites (see Gugl & Davey, 2020; Martiny & Lawrence, 2023; Rajan & Venkatraman, 2021). It has been further noted that these mainstream pages work as potential gateways into more radical content on alternative (or Alt-Tech) platforms (Mamié et al., 2021). This paper aims to highlight the growing use of MSMs by extremist and far-right groups and users often in spite or manipulation of the hate speech policies and user agreements. We intend to highlight how the continued use of these MSMs by extremist groups is reflective of both far-right ideologues' manipulation and side-stepping of hate speech policies and the vagaries of MSMs regulations, as indicated in Zuckerberg's earlier quoted statement.

The proliferation of far-right and extremist political discourse online is in no way a new phenomenon; far-right ideologues have utilised these networks since the circulation of Web 1.0 with websites such as Stormfront leading the cause and challenging the misunderstanding of such individuals as uneducated or unintelligent (Daniels, 2009), as is evident in their sophisticated avoidance of moderation tactics. Digital networks have always played a key role in the development of extremist and far-right communities. That

this growth has extended into the Irish context is, however, novel given the country's lack of significant far-right political party or political action prior to 2022/2023. It has only been in the last several years that a growing Irish far-right presence has been noted and connected to the Irish government's response to the Covid-10 pandemic. In particular, the disaffection and dissatisfaction of many citizens owing to extended lockdowns and restrictions became topics of ire and frustration across social media channels and, eventually, alt-tech platforms. Within this context, the Irish far-right flourished, reflecting the discontent of the larger population and proffering easy answers, exploiting the real disenfranchisement many felt via conspiracy theories that offered a quick return to the norm (e.g. that the virus was a hoax). Evidently, the radicalisation of Irish citizens via these groups did not stop with anti-vax narratives or covid-scepticism. Rather, far-right ideologues indoctrinated their new followers into more traditional and well-known far-right agendas which commonly vilified minority groups and challenged liberal or democratic politics. Climate denial, populist discourses and nationalism conjoined with anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-immigration narratives became common discussion points on both SMSs and alt-tech channels. While it is not within the scope of this work to cover all these topics, we intend to focus our analysis on how anti-LGBTQ+ discourse is shared on these sites. In doing so, we will provide a detailed content analysis of a video uploaded by Irish far-right journalist-cum-politician, Andy Heasman, in which he and a small group of supporters target an Irish bookstore for selling LGBTQ+ material.

Our analysis will focus on the use of language to consider how figures such as Heasman avoid the likelihood of their content being moderated or removed under META policies. Indeed, Heasman's avoidance of hateful language that targets LGBTQ+ people is replaced in favour of the language of protection and guardianship, with the symbolic figure of the child being central to their argument, hence avoiding META's regulation policies. In order to create a rounded discussion of these policies – and the context in which Heasman and other far-right ideologues and extremists are managing to

share their content despite hate speech and anti-extremism regulations – we will begin this paper with a historical overview of platform governance policies and the historical contexts which led to the ongoing moderating and deplatforming of far-right. It is our contention that these policies have informed how the far-right are currently sharing their political messages on MSMs, and, furthermore, that such posts may act as gateways into more radical and extremist positions.

### **From early bans to the great deplatforming**

Deplatforming, or the permanent banning of an individual, group, or organisation from a platform, has long been a contentious topic that the far-right have frequently framed as, at best, attempted censorship and, at worst, tech companies bowing to liberal pressure. Controversies ranging from the effectiveness of deplatforming in disengaging radicalisation of users to whether free speech trumps hate speech are common reservations from both sides of the argument. As far as mitigating the reach of extremist discourse and the potential for radicalisation, the effects of deplatforming cannot be undermined. In 2016, when alt-right darling and Breitbart news editor Milo Yiannopoulos was banned from Twitter<sup>1</sup> for his role in organising a targeted hate campaign against comedian/actress Leslie Jones, few could foretell the influence such a move would have over his career. While Yiannopoulos may have initially celebrated the decision (Romano, 2016), he later claimed that removal from MSMs effectively ended his career and rendered him broke (Klein, 2020).

Yiannopoulos' removal was not strictly unprecedented given his frequent suspension owing to various policy violations and harassment of other users. Significantly, the use of temporary suspensions represents another facet of the deplatforming strategy: other methods including content

1. Yiannopoulos would later be banned from other MSMs, including Youtube and Facebook.

removal, warning or strike systems, demonetization<sup>2</sup> and shadow-banning<sup>3</sup> are further implemented by various platforms as a means of encouraging stronger engagement with the user policies. Regardless of these other methods, Yiannopoulos' removal surprised many even beyond his loyal followers and fellow trolls; not least because such big tech platforms had long been accused of purposefully maintaining, propagating, and profiteering off such content (Kirk & Schill, 2024). Twitter, at the time, responded with a commitment to improve their moderation and removal policies having also received negative backlash following their handling of Gamergate: 'We have been in the process of reviewing our hateful conduct policy to prohibit additional types of behaviour and allow more types of reporting, with the goal of reducing the burden on the person being targeted' (Romano, 2016).<sup>4</sup>

In 2018, Infowars conspiracist and radio-show host Alex Jones faced similar repercussions as his channel was removed from Facebook, YouTube and streaming services Spotify and Apple, with Twitter later following suit. As with Yiannopoulos, Jones had faced a series of repercussions and warnings for sharing harmful content on his podcasts and channels, and for the type of conspiracies and disinformation his channels traded in, particularly in rebranding national tragedies as hoaxes. Jones' frequent reiteration of the belief that the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting – which tragically took the lives of 26 people, 20 being children in December 2012 – was a manufactured hoax perpetrated by a liberal government aiming to restrict gun laws, identifying it as a 'false flag' operation, referring to the grieving parents and survivors as 'crisis actors' (Sellnow et al., 2019: 131). While the MSMs which banned Jones did not directly cite the reason for removal,

2. Demonetization, as a strategy of platform governance, involves removing the opportunity for verified users to monetize their channels, effectively removing their ability to make money via the content they provide and/or the ads and sponsorship they endorse.

3. Shadow-banning involves the partial blocking of a user's content from reaching their followers and other audiences. While the content remains available on the user's page, it effectively does not appear on follower's feeds or updates, causing a lack of engagement. This tool often means content searches will often exclude a shadow-banned account's posts also.

4. The harassment campaign known as Gamergate involved an orchestrated attack primarily against women in the gaming community. While many claimed the campaign was about ethics in the larger gaming industry, Gamergate has been noted for a series of virulent and elongated online attacks against women gamers, designers and content creators, including game programmer Zoe Quinn and gaming vlogger Anita Sarkeesian.

references to policy violation and hate speech along with violent discourse were common across the board (Coaston, 2018). Reflecting on Zuckerberg's printed quote and the noted polarisation he espouses between disinformation and hate speech, it is worth citing that Facebook clearly differentiated from others in locating hate speech and *not* disinformation, alarmingly dividing two highly intertwined narrative devices: 'While much of the discussion around Infowars has been related to false news, which is a serious issue that we are working to address by demoting links marked wrong by fact checkers and suggesting additional content, none of the violations that spurred today's removals were related to this' (Coaston, 2018). Jones, again mirroring the effects of deplatforming on Yiannopoulos, has similarly claimed bankruptcy and, moreover, is facing charges as a result of defaming the Sandy Hook families (Robertson, 2022). Evidently, both Yiannopoulos and Jones' removal from MSMs has been linked to a noted regression in their celebrity status, limiting their overall reach to other users and effected their wealth.

These early examples of mainstream deplatforming provide evidence that removal of persons from MSMs – and removal of the extremist content therein – is indeed a successful method for undoing and undermining far-right extremism and hate speech. Indeed, Jhaver, Boylston, Yang and Bruckman's analysis of deplatforming as a tool found that the removal of far-right actors (in this case, Yiannopoulos, Jones, and comedian Owen Benjamin) had resulted in not only a drop in posting activity of their supporters but also reduced the 'overall toxicity levels of supporters of each influencer' (2021: 4). The findings indicated the 'efficacy of deplatforming offensive influencers to counteract offensive speech in online communities' (Jhaver, 2021: 4). Other researchers produced similar results, finding deplatforming to be an effective tool of platform governance for mainstream sites (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2021; Rogers, 2020). Reddit's decision to remove fat-shaming and racist subreddits in 2015, for example, was determined a success as offensive and hate-fuelled content apparently decreased (Chandrasekharan et al., 2017; Saleem & Ruths, 2018), while others have

'found that deplatforming significantly reduce[s] the popularity of many anti-social ideas associated with influencers' such as Yiannopoulos and Jones (Jhaver et al., 2021). Deplatforming has additionally been found to mitigate the spread of disinformation somewhat, though the sharing of content often continues via new account or new sharing streams and at times is more a disruption in the content stream than a deterrent or undoing (Bruns et al., 2021; Innes & Innes, 2023).

The Covid-19 years witnessed a series of deplatforming's for influencers who peddled in misleading and harmful health narratives; disinformation was rife throughout this period, with MSMs introducing visible fact checking methods and issuing warnings on posts related to the pandemic. With the pandemic and these sweeping measures came new, alternative platforms that offered less stringent moderation policies and greater leniency to its users. Alt-tech platforms opened their arms to new users and known influences such as Yiannopoulos and Jones (who invited their fanbases to follow their new channels) and profited. YouTube replica Bitchute and Twitter-esque platform Gab both boasted increased users and traffic owing to deplatforming measures (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2021) pointing to the greater issue: 'When deplatformed social media celebrities migrate to alternative platforms, these sites are given a boost through media attention and increases in user counts' (Rogers, 2020: 214). The migration of deplatformed users and their followers to such platforms could boast further negative effects, rendering it more difficult to police and navigate extremist threats. In some cases, it has been highlighted that deplatforming, while restricting the reach and audience of extremist content, has rendered users more hostile and active (Ali et al., 2021) and may contribute to the production of deeper radicalisation (Buntain et al., 2023: 2; Urman & Katz, 2022: 908). The disadvantages of deplatforming are evident, and there remains serious debate on how and why MSMs utilise it.

In this regard, there are legitimate concerns to how deplatforming is enacted and there are debates that more resemble strawmen. For the latter group, deplatforming is often presented as a form of censorship that

suppresses free speech, thereby threatening core human rights and freedoms, as Alex Jones compared his deplatforming as akin to ‘communist style censorship’ (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2021: 5). The free speech debate further consolidates the conspiratorial belief that governments and tech companies either highly influenced or outrightly controlled by liberal elites (Alfino, 2023: 11; Mulhall, 2019). According to communications researcher Prashanth Bhat, the liberal bias argument is not novel but rather has been an ongoing narrative device of conservative groups and is being ‘re-weaponized by the American Right to challenge the credibility of corporate social platforms’ (2022: 109). The right and responsibility of such corporations to protect themselves legally and to uphold their user agreements and the values espoused (see van Dijck et al., 2023) are largely disregarded within this narrative frame. Yiannopoulos replicated these exact discourses in his lamentation of Twitter becoming a ‘safe space’ (Romano, 2016) at the expense of open debate and free speech. This use of language invalidates liberal politics and ideologies as potentially coddling and certainly too “politically correct” as a result of practices that include providing trigger/content warnings or offering safe spaces to marginalised groups. As for labelling these discourses as strawmen, there is significant irony behind the far-rights considerable fight for free speech when it suits their agenda. Indeed, the far-right continuously undermine the rights of minority groups to be heard; as this paper will go on to depict, currently many far-right groups are engaging in library and bookstore protests which disputes the availability LGBTQ+ content. As Adrian Rauchfleisch and Jonas Kaiser have noted: ‘calling deplatforming censorship, then, is often more a rhetorical weapon to avoid acknowledging the spread of disinformation, racism, or other extremist speech, than an accurate and honest analysis’ (2021: 6).

Scholars, by contrast, query the fairness and bias of these procedures, expressing concern over how deplatforming and other forms of moderation are operationalized and managed. The moderation and removal of content and users from MSMs often involves policies and actions that are non-transparent and difficult to challenge. The innate human bias involved



in both manual content moderation and AI or automated content moderation make the likelihood of mis-contextualisation (relating to language use or other circumstantial instances), errors and biased decision-making; further involved and prone to biases are user reports, content flags and other automated tools (Díaz & Hecht-Felella, 2021). Indeed, concerns abound in this regard:

‘A growing body of scholarship has documented the multiple challenged with commercial content moderation as enacted by platforms today, ranging from labour concerns (about the tax concerns) about conditions and mental health challenges faced by moderators, many of whom are outsourced contractors in the Global South); democratic legitimacy concerns (about global speech rules being set by a relatively homogeneous group of Silicon Valley elites); and process concerns about the overall lack of transparency’ (Gorwa et al., 2020: 2).

Human rights advocates and academics, such as the Santa Clara Principles have argued the necessity of transparency and accountability in moderation policies and platform governance from big tech companies; and while many of these MSMs now offer regular transparency reports and appeals procedures, the processes behind deplatforming, moderation and the management of data more broadly remains opaque and, often, selective. The widespread censoring, for example, of pro-Palestinian stories from META’s platforms has been noted by the Human Rights Watch despite much of the data being non-violent and yet was ‘unduly suppressed’ in a ‘systemic and global’ manner (Brown & Younes, 2023). A majority of MSMs are governed by for-profit enterprises and, as such, prioritise capital accumulation.

This fact has not escaped broader public attention, with headlines such as the following emerging: ‘social media companies prioritising profit over harmful content: Senate report’ (Barr, 2022). There is a near impossibility in proving such statements, given the convoluted and cryptic characteristics of content moderation and data management within these companies. Indeed, potent questions abound when powerful and influential figures

seem to post with impunity while others are subject to strict regulation (Díaz & Hecht-Felella, 2021: 15-16). Thus, the argument remains: ‘On social and digital media, algorithms reinforce and amplify outrage and extremity. Both legacy as well as digital and social media have mastered the art of monetizing anger, paranoia, and distrust’ (Kirk & Schill, 2024: 6).

Public intervention and global events, as much as users’ actions, can impact wide scale deplatforming, as was witnessed with the covid-19 pandemic and the spread of disinformation during this time. Indeed, the removal of Yiannopoulos and Jones from MSMs in 2018 has been linked to growing public outrage over far-right violence that had occurred at a demonstration in Charlottesville in late 2017. The Unite Right Rally unified many cohorts of the alt- and far-right including Neo-Nazis, nationalists, and white supremacists, one of whom would deliberately drove a vehicle into a crowd of counter-protestors, injuring 35 and killing Heather Hayes in the process. Trump’s election, growing far-right popularity across the West and other political motivations heralded new opportunities for these right-leaning groups to (re)legitimise their political efforts, which the Unite the Right rally capitalised on. MSMs played a major role promoting the rally (Donoval et al., 2019); a reality which many of these corporations took great pains to distance themselves from after the violence of the event. In an apparent attempt to mitigate claims that they had served as propagators (and profitters) of the rally during its organisation and promotion, many MSMs responded with serious moderation upheavals (Donovan et al., 2019). Referred to as the ‘purge’ (Rauchfleisch & Kaiser, 2021: 9), the deplatforming of high-profile, far-right ideologies such as Jones and Yiannopoulos, was perhaps more politically motivated to protect MSM corporations than community standards.

Rita Kirk and Dan Schill have produced similar results in their research of the Jan. 6 Capitol siege, during which staunch Trump supporters stormed the Capitol building in Washington, adamant that election fraud had secured Trump’s loss. MSMs – which were ‘foundational before, during, and after the attack’ (Kirk & Schill, 2024: 6) – were again in the hot seat and held responsible for the disinformation which circulated regarding electoral

fraud and, moreover, for the consistent display of leniency granted to Trump whose messages frequently espoused violent and hate-filled content along with gratuitous and dangerous disinformation (Díaz & Hecht-Felella, 2021: 16). In what has since become termed “the Great Deplatforming,” Trump, and other key figures involved in the Capitol siege and in touting electoral fraud disinformation, were permanently banned from several MSMs. In conservative fashion, Trump would be-cry the loss of free speech and claim that MSMs were working at the ‘behest of Democrats and the radical-left’ (Bhat, 2022: 108). Many users would follow their far-right ideologues to the alt-tech sites that were decidedly unlike mainstream platforms (Bhat, 2022: 111), many of whom would relocate their views to more lenient alt-tech sites. This, along with promises of user anonymity, end-to-end encryption, and privacy, renders alt-tech sites as virtual havens for extreme content creators and the far right to share their politics and ideologies, build communities and movements, and establish legitimacy even with regard to the disinformation and hate-fuelled content they share.

### **Hate speech and anti-LGBTQ+ narratives**

While alt-tech sites provide ideal spaces for the growth of far-right political groups, this does not negate the continued significance of MSMs for them too. As stated, alt-tech sites provide ample opportunities for growth but not the reach or audience present on more mainstream spaces. The importance of these more populated virtual spheres as potential gateways into more radical and extremist content remains and they are still sought out as spaces to share far-right content as such, even despite the risk of content removal, as guarantors of a mainstream presence. Indeed, as this paper goes on to argue, many far-right users have adopted savvy techniques to sidestep content removal and deplatforming, locating the nuance in MSMs hate policies and user agreements in a way that makes the content acceptable. As has been highlighted, the nuances and complexities of language, context and situation can render the concept of hate speech as questionable; even the use of slurs is debatable when key target groups are reclaiming them

as a means of power (Gorwa et al., 2020: 10). We need only refer back to the opening quotation from Zuckerberg to recognise that for MSMs, content moderation of hate speech is a complex process.

Myriad definitions and vague policies further exacerbate such complexities, lending little in the way of direction for moderations or those flaggers who report on content they deem harmful. Given this, it is perhaps redundant to state that hate speech lacks a singular definition. Rather, we can consider hate speech as referring to discourse which dehumanises or discriminately targets historically othered and minority groups; as incitements to violence against these groups; and as means of undermining the agency and self-determination of said groups (see Daermstadt et al., 2019; Guhl & Davey, 2020; Saresma et al., 2020). Furthermore, as Zuckerberg's statements fail to recognise, hate speech and disinformation as narrative tactics are often intertwined, fabricating events and discourses to undermine the rights and existence of minority and target groups.

All MSMs prohibit hate speech in some form, as Tarleton Gillespie argues it is 'a safe position politically' (2018: 59), and often reiterates the very community values that these sites lay claim to. Facebook/META's mission statement has always been 'to build community and bring the world closer together' while one of META's key principles is to 'keep people safe and protect privacy,' highlights their apparent commitment to their community's wellbeing (META). META defines hate speech as 'direct attacks against people – rather than concepts or institutions – on the basis of what we call protected characteristics' (META). The platform further recognises dehumanising speech, stereotyping, expressions of inferiority or segregation as acts of hate speech. Such abstract definitions provide fertile ground for manipulation and circumvention; far-right actors such as Heasman are especially tactical in their avoidance of egregious language or slurs and will reference targeted groups in roundabout ways, focusing their attention on those that they reconceive of as being most vulnerable and at risk as a means of undermining and discrediting the group they are truly targeting. These tactics provide opportunities for the far-right to further deny their

intolerances and discriminatory politics in the guise of protecting another vulnerable group. Prime examples of this include references to the Irish housing crisis and homelessness when protesting migrant accommodation and asylum seekers rights and, as will be discussed, a focus on children and childhood to contest LGBTQ+ visibility.

Such tactical measures are not only elusive of META's slippery policies, they also encourage further public engagement and sympathy via such manipulative discourse. As has been highlighted, META is keen to outline the nuances apparent when enforcing their own policies, as Zuckerberg's irresponsible quote suggests. More succinctly, the reality of content moderation as a tool is challengeable when context cues and acceptable language are elusive as they tend to be on social media. Indeed, while the use of slurs are not permitted according to META's policies, their reclamation as an act of power and transgression by certain minority groups provides ample ground for reconsidering the effectiveness of content moderation more generally. And indeed, the reliance on and use of these methods remains debateable with Zuckerberg claiming before US congress in 2020 that Facebook hate speech moderation was at 94 per cent and META's transparency reports locating actioned content as consistently between 80 and 90 per cent; whereas leaked documents seem to place the number at a more meagre 3 to 5 per cent (Giansiracusa, 2021). Meanwhile, international NGO Global Witness sought to test Facebook's tolerance toward hate speech, introducing ads to the platform which targeted and dehumanised marginalised groups and incited violence against them. The ads varied in relation to location and content but were explicitly hate-fuelled and were sent for publication to Facebook, TikTok and YouTube; of the three, Facebook accepted the majority (Peck, 2023). Such findings query not only the actual statistics but the very efficacy of the policies which META is governed under. Between such slippery definitions and potentially false statistics, the question of how hate speech proliferates on such platforms is a pertinent one, particularly as the far-right community grows across them.

Homophobia is well documented within these far-right communities, with anti-LGBTQ+ narrative constituting a primary aspect of their political ideologies (Mudde, 2019). In particular, recent years have witnessed staunch and highly discriminatory rhetoric and actions against trans and queer communities. For the far-right, these groups represent real threats to the heteronormative order and the traditional family structure (Leidig, 2023: 75). Fears of indoctrination and grooming are strongly articulated across far-right digital channels (Leidig, 2023: 90); often, these narratives are connected to the concept of “gender ideology,” and feminist/queer theory which extends gender beyond binary restrictors and opens sexuality beyond the heteronormative. The perceived threat which this poses to the natural order and nuclear family thus becomes a central concern for the far-right. Within these narrative frames, the figure of the child is often central and symbolically placed as being in need of protection and support (Slothouber, 2020: 93). Crucially, such rhetoric often overlooks the needs of trans and queer youth who may be seeking such supports and resources.

In the eyes of many far-right and conservative groups, LGBTQ+ youth do not exist but are rather groomed or indoctrinated via various liberal ideologies. One broad frame often used in this is related to what they call “gender ideology,” a perceived liberal agenda that the far-right argues is undoing the biological order of sex and sexuality and which threatens natural gender norms. The far-right deploys these arguments as a ‘political instrument’ that delegitimise liberal and feminist politics (Corredor, 2019: 616): ‘The use of the term *gender ideology* functions discursively to bring together different forms of right-wing mobilization, united against progressive demands for gender equality and against tolerance for sexual diversity’ (Leidig, 2023: 80). It is crucial to note that these discourses do not exist in a vacuum, rather with the growth of these narratives online there have emerged simultaneous upswings in real world hate crimes and acts of violence (Godzisz & Vigiani, 2019).

In early 2023, the Irish police force, An Garda Síochána, released a report noting a 29 per cent rise in hate related incidents, with LGBTQ+ people

marked as the second most targeted group following racial minorities (Fanucci, 2023). This statistic and the marked rise in far-right political agitation in Ireland cannot be undermined. Indeed, over 2023 there was a marked rise in far-right demonstrations against LGBTQ+ resources and activities across Ireland. This has included the intimidation of groups organising and supporting trans events (Linehan, 2023) and a rally organised by TERF activist, Posie Parker, and anti-trans group, Let Women Speak, in Dublin city centre<sup>5</sup> (McGreevy, 2023). Libraries and bookstores have been primary targets for these groups throughout 2023, with demonstrations protesting the availability of LGBTQ+ material for minors and young adults (Fitzgerald, 2023). Such protests, again, overlook the necessity of such material and resources for LGBTQ+ youth while hypocritically insisting that their agenda is to safeguard Irish children. Simultaneously, their focus on texts which prioritise queer sexual health acts to further stigmatise LGBTQ+ sexuality and sexual acts more broadly.

### **Protesting LGBTQ+ material**

The aim of this analysis is twofold: firstly, to provide a critical analysis of the anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric used by far-right ideologues on MSMs and secondly, to consider how this rhetoric often circumnavigates MSM hate speech policies and community/user agreements. In order to do so, we provide a detailed content analysis of the dialogue taken from a Facebook video post uploaded to far-right activist Andy Heasman's public page. The post depicts a demonstration at Irish bookstore chain, Dubray, where Heasman and a supporting cohort of protestors, object to the availability and sale of LGBTQ+ sexual health and lifestyle material to minors. Heasman, who takes the lead in the filmed protest, has earned himself a name as a far-right agitator across Ireland, and reached notoriety during the Covid-19 pandemic with the circulation of anti-vaccine disinformation and his arrest for purposefully disregarding the mask mandate on public transport. While advertising himself as a freelance Irish journalist and declaring intentions

5. Importantly, a counter-protest simultaneously took place celebrating queer and trans lives.

to run as an independent candidate in the 2024 Irish elections, Heasman is widely known for his involvement in far-right protests, in particular he has championed himself as a protector of children via ongoing library and bookstore protests (Fitzgerald, 2023). Indeed, Heasman regularly posts about these protests to his multiple social media accounts. The Facebook video we intend to analyse remains active on Heasman's public Facebook profile: it was uploaded 25 June 2023 and runs for a total of 27 minutes and 2 seconds, during which Heasman and his accomplices attempt to debate the indoctrination of Irish children by Dubray staff and the LGBTQ+ material they stock. We will provide both a descriptive content analysis of the transcript and a visual analysis of the video to provide a detailed examination of the encounter and compare the results with Facebook policy in our analysis.

As stated, Heasman's video takes place in Co. Cork bookshop, Dubray, and takes aim at the LGBTQ+ resources available through their premises. Heasman, behind the camera, is joined by fellow far-right agitator Ross Lahive and several others, two members of Dubray staff and, later, intervening Gardai (who Heasman himself requested under the belief that a crime is taking place via the sale of such materials to minors). The books in question, *This Book is Gay* and *What's the T?* both by Juno Dawson (a transgender woman), are best described as introductions and guides on different aspects of queer identity aimed at teens and young adults and include information on sexual acts and safe sex. *What's the T?* focuses primarily on questions that transgender and non-binary teens and young adults may be grappling with, while Dawson herself has referred to *This Book is Gay* as 'a manual to all areas of life as an LGBT person' (Dawson, 2014). Heasman and his supporters, however, are quick in their video to identify both works as 'pornography' (2023). Their primary argument insists that as such, it is being illegally marketed and sold to children according to the Irish Child Protection Act 2015. Also known as Children First, this legislature highlights that sexual abuse against a child includes 'wilful exposure of the child to pornography' (Children First Act 2015).



Heasman and his support utilise this line of argument throughout, contending that Dubray and its staff are engaging in illegal activities via the sale of such material to minors; at the presence of Gardaí, Heasman and Lahive become insistent on this fact and call for arrests of staff or removal of the materials. Two points of note here: both books are advertised for teens (not children as the videos falsely and frequently states) and are visibly marked as having ‘mature content’ via a sticker applied by Dubray (Heasman, 2023). Evidently, the mature nature of the content is recognised and regarded seriously, as is the case with many teen and YA books available within such stores and which were not taken to task by Heasman or his supporters. Similarly questionable is why these protests do not challenge the availability of texts which detail sexual health and well-being for heteronormative youths. While this point alone does suggest the hypocritical and discriminatory nature of such protests, it remains notable throughout this video that references to LGBTQ+ identities are almost non-existent (apart from a transphobic instance at the end of the video). Rather, Heasman and Lahive carefully redirect their language away from the issue being LGBTQ+ identities or materials and concentrate more on the potential indoctrination or sexualisation of children that could occur as a result of such material. This discourse itself relates to an entire history of myths and prejudices that conflated homosexuality with paedophilia, historically misidentifying queer men as threats to children (see Bennett et al., 2024). Such rape myths pathologized homosexuality and queerness as deviant and perverse (Bennett et al., 2024: 1); an iteration which is implicit in the arguments made by Heasman, Lahive and his supporters.

The video begins abruptly with Heasman and Lahive already mid-debate with the Dubray staff, querying the age group the books are sold to, specifically asking whether a bookseller would hypothetically sell the material to a ten-year-old. Both declare that the store and its workers have a ‘duty of care’ to its consumers and, primarily, the hypothetical children purchasing such material (2023). The protestors are quick to claim that the material actively ‘grooms’ and ‘indoctrinates’ children, holds the booksellers accountable for

selling this “porn” illegally to minors, and highlights their moral ground by painting themselves as guardians of children. They are ‘standing up for defenceless children’ and express concerns that the material is ‘damaging to children’s health’ (Heasman, 2023). Implicit here, of course, is the false equivalency that historically has linked homosexuality and illness/disease which was heightened during the AIDs epidemic (see Sontag, 1989). Such statements and beliefs continue to produce prejudicial feelings and acts against the queer community, displaying further disregard for children and teens who are likely to identify beyond the heteronormative. And indeed, despite claiming their latent guardianship of Ireland’s children, at no point does the likelihood of queer youth necessitating access to such material considered. Rather, it is ostensibly suggested via their argumentation that children and teens do not identify as LGBTQ+ so much as they are indoctrinated into it. The implicit homophobia behind these arguments becomes clear again when Lahive and Heasman condemn what could be considered the crasser information the text proffers in sections that detail safe anal douching and oral sex. Lahive and Heasman both reference the texts as ‘despicable’ and ‘filth’ at this and other points of the post (Heasman, 2023). The reactions of disgust and moral outrage expressed in this instance not only stigmatises queer desire and sex but threatens safe and easy access to one of the few LGBTQ+ sexual health resources available to queer youth.

When visible on video, several of the protestors are seen to be wearing ‘education not indoctrination’ t-shirts, a popular slogan of the far-right which highlights the concern that the teaching of inclusive gender identity and sex-ed in schools (and other instructional institutions such as libraries) is actively grooming Irish youth (O’Connor, 2023). As aforementioned, what is clear via this ideology is the symbolic use of the child as a marker of the need for anti-LGBTQ+ political action. The existence of such groups and the resources they require are framed as threats to children’s health and well-being. Van Slothouber, in their work on mainstream media and stories of detransitioning, highlights the significance of the child as a symbol in anti-trans (and anti-LGBTQ+) politics. Following queer theorist Lee Edelman’s

theory in *No Future*, ‘the Child remains a figurative child, “not to be confused with the lived experiences of any historical child” (Edelman, 2004: 11) [...] This ideological discourse works to deny citizens of their rights in the here and now, instead holding out for this future Child’ (2020: 93).

In this respect, we can consider the means by which the discourses Heasman, Lahive and his cohort utter as often undoing the existence of queer children or teens as a matter of fact. Indeed, when Heasman states that children ‘shouldn’t be able to stumble across filth like this’ (Heasman, 2023) there is little to no regard for children or teens actively searching for such resources; in fact, for these groups, such children are indoctrinated into seeking this material rather than seeking it out at their own initiative and will. This, in itself, points to the manner in which the group manages to avoid almost completely any discussion of LGBTQ+ people in this work. Keeping in line with META’s hate speech policies, Heasman and his cohort avoid directly referencing any protected or vulnerable groups directly, in fact they manage to mostly avoid any utterance of the words gay, lesbian, or queer. Rather, they are able, through the symbol of the child, to focus their attention on the texts and direct the problems associated with these groups to the health and well-being of that hypothetical being.

The only instance in which queer identities are specifically mentioned and targeted occurs towards the end of the video when, in a bid to depict the varied moral transgressions of the bookstore, Lahive takes aim at trans actor Elliot Page’s memoir, *PageBoy*. The book, wherein Page recounts his coming out as both queer and trans, and the book-jacket depicts Page’s transformation following top-surgery and hormone replacement therapy. In the video both Heasman and Lahive direct their ire towards Page depicting their transphobia: both deadnaming the actor and repeatedly using the wrong pronouns, flippantly noting:

Heasman: She [Page] was gorgeous.

Lahive: Gorgeous, you know?

Heasman: Look at the state of her now.

This discourse points to the inherent misogyny and sexism rife within anti-trans and far-right politics, where women's worth becomes linked to beauty and reproduction primarily. A later altercation in the video further depicts said beliefs, a customer purchasing a queer text is approached by Heasman, who informs him that the store 'sells porn to kids.' The customer, themselves purchasing a queer themed book, calls Heasman a 'Nazi' leaving Heasman to condescendingly ponder if the man is a 'predator' simply for purchasing a queer-themed text, again reiterating these links (Heasman, 2023). The sharing of such disinformation is a key aspect of these groups, and often allows them to push specific agendas. As noted at the beginning of this work via Zuckerberg's quote, disinformation is not necessarily of great concern for META: indeed, the right of Facebook's users to express different ideas and opinions is protected in their policies just as people are protected from hate speech and discrimination on them. Disinformation, in this case, exaggerates the content of Dawson's texts and, in doing so, poses them as sexually licentious and too advanced for their age group.

This is evident again in Lahive and Heasman's recontextualising of the sexual material available within the book. Despite its matter-of-fact style and that it comes from a trustworthy source (rather than queer youth having to seek out such information from strangers on the internet, for example) and offers salient advice on safe sex, STIs and queer stereotypes, Lahive and Heasman demonise these texts via their expressions of moral outrage and repulsion. Another protester falsely states that the author explicitly tells their readers to join queer dating app Grindr, a platform that is known for its proclivity and hook-up culture. Similarly, when discussing the issue with Gardai, Heasman also incorrectly states that the books are 'telling 11-year-olds to go onto these apps [Grindr] where predators can get them' (Heasman, 2023). While the book does contain information of popular queer sites and dating apps, particularly Grindr, it is balanced in its objectives pointing to the positives and negatives of such sites, as well as providing advice on how to navigate them and engage with other users. Moreover, Dawson explicitly states in the print that such sites are for 18-year-olds plus with emphasis

(2021). The larger philosophical debate that remains here is that while it may seem jarring that this content is aimed at teens, the text remains the more tasteful and secure option for queer teens who may otherwise find themselves out of their depths or would have to circumnavigate the disinformation, homophobia, and extremist content (porn included) of the internet to find such information.

The rhetoric in this video, while tellingly anti-LGBTQ+ in its aim, is tame in its rhetoric. Barring the transphobic statements relating to Page, there is little in the way of a verbal, targeted attack on the queer community. This restructuring of anti-LGBTQ politics into a more palatable discourse has become an essential element in the (re)legitimation of far-right political groups in recent years. Indeed, across platforms, far-right ideologues are cautious of the language and ideologies they tout, particularly figures such as Heasman and Lahive who have advocated for far-right political candidates and have considered or are entering the electoral race themselves.<sup>6</sup> Tellingly, however, this does not extend to the followers and audience of posts who are free to express themselves more egregiously. While many avoid explicit homophobic and transphobic remarks on MSMs, the use of alt-tech platforms – which has grown exponentially in recent years – has encouraged and permitted the use of hate speech and anti-LGBTQ+ discourse. On Heasman’s public Telegram channel, for example, his followers offer a multitude of responses that range from messages of support to a use of slurs and reaffirmations of queer stereotypes and rape myths that connect trans people to groomers, predators and paedophiles, and calls for a regression of LGBTQ+ rights such as gender affirming health care for trans people. The fact that such rhetoric is shared without impunity on these platforms, and that the administrators like Heasman do not act to remove such posts or remonstrate the original poster, demonstrates their very acceptance. As with most echo-chambers, those who denounce or challenge

6. Heasman had announced his intention to stand as an independent candidate in late 2023 but withdrew his bid online in January 2024. Lahive is still considering running for Irish election as an independent candidate in 2024.

these discourses are marked as Other; as with the customer in Dubray who dared denounce Heasman's politics, these denouncers are posited similarly as dangers and threats.

What is evident via this analysis is that while the rhetoric has changed, the ideology has not; these far-right ideologies are rather the wolf in sheep's clothing on MSM platforms, maintaining their regressive stance to undermine LGBTQ+ gains and challenge them at any opportunity via new discursive techniques and tactics. In their deferral to the symbol of the innocent child, the Irish far-right is building a more acceptable route to homo- and transphobia; those who are reiterating anti-LGBTQ+ messages can defend themselves not as bigots or discriminators but as merely concerned about Ireland's future and the next generation. These strategies have been essential to the development of the Irish far-right and the ubiquity with which their messages are spreading to the broader public. They have further permitted the far-right to remain present across MSM platforms despite ongoing moderation and deplatforming efforts. What remains evident is that while hate speech policies remain vague and undetermined in their moderation of extremist and discriminatory content, the far-right will continue to maintain a mainstream presence and employ tactical means such as those shown to ensure the circulation of their narratives.

## **Acknowledgement**

This work is supported by the Irish Research Council, grant number COALESCE 2021/39

## **References**

- Alfino, M. (2023). Free speech issues in the regulation of social media platforms. *Journal of Information Ethics*, 32(1), 10-14.
- Ali, S., Saeed, M. H., Aldreabi, E., Blackburn, J., De Cristofaro, E., Zannettou, S., & Stringhini, G. (2021). Understanding the effect of deplatforming on social networks. *Proceedings of the 13th ACM Web Science Conference 2021*, 187-195.

- Barr, L. (2022, 16 Nov). Social media companies prioritizing profit over harmful content: Senate report'. *ABCNews*. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/social-media-companies-prioritizing-profit-harmful-content-senate/story?id=93360057>
- Bennett, M., Harris, D. A., Richards, K., & Shields, R. (2024). 'Any male victim?' The legacy of conflating paedophilia and homosexuality and the differential seriousness of sexual abuse by victim gender. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, 1-15.
- Bhat, P. (2022). Counter-net of tomorrow?: Right-wing responses to deplatforming Trump. In *The future of the presidency, journalism, and democracy: after Trump* (pp. 107-126). Routledge.
- Brown, D. & Younes, R. (2023, 20 Dec). Meta's broken promises: Systemic censorship of Palestine content on Instagram and Facebook. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metas-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>
- Bruns, A., Harrington, S., & Hurcombe, E. (2021). *Coronavirus conspiracy theories: Tracing misinformation trajectories from the fringes to the mainstream. Communicating COVID-19: Interdisciplinary perspectives*, 229-249.
- Buntain, C., Innes, M., Mitts, T., & Shapiro, J. (2023). Cross-platform reactions to the post-january 6 deplatforming. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, 3
- Chandrasekharan, E., Pavalanathan, U., Srinivasan, A., Glynn, A., Eisenstein, J., & Gilbert, E. (2017). You can't stay here: The efficacy of reddit's 2015 ban examined through hate speech. *Proceedings of the ACM on human-computer interaction*, 1(CSCW), 1-22
- Children First Act 2015, Part 1. (2015). *Dail Eireann*.
- Coaston, J. (2018, 6 Aug). Youtube, Facebook, and Apple's ban on Alex Jones, explained. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/2018/8/6/17655658/alex-jones-facebook-youtube-conspiracy-theories>
- Cohen-Almagor, R. (2016). Facebook and Holocaust Denial. *Justice*, 57, 10-16.

- Corredor, E. S. (2019). Unpacking “gender ideology” and the global right’s antigender countermovement. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(3), 613-638.
- Daniels, J. (2018). *Cyber racism: White supremacy online and the new attack on civil rights*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Darmstadt, A., Prinz, M., & Saal, O. (2019). The murder of Keira: Misinformation and hate speech as far-right online strategies. In M. Fielitz & N Thurston (Eds), *Post-digital cultures of the far-right* (pp. 155-167). Transcript.
- Dawson, J. (2021). *This book is gay*. Sourcebooks, Inc.
- Dawson, J. (2014, 4 Sep). Why my book is gay: And I’m proud of it. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2014/sep/04/this-book-is-gay-james-dawson>
- Díaz, Á. & Hecht-Felella, L. (2021). Double standards in social media content moderation. *Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law*. <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/double-standards-socialmedia-content-moderation>
- Donovan, J., Lewis, B., & Friedberg, B. (2019). Parallel ports: Sociotechnical change from the Alt-Right to Alt-Tech. In M. Fielitz & N. Thurston (Eds), *Post-digital cultures of the far right: Online actions and offline consequences in Europe and the US* (pp. 49–65). Transcript.
- Fanucci, B. (2023, 22 Mar). 29% increase in hate4 crimes and hate-related incidents in Ireland, Gardaí report. *GCN*. <https://gcn.ie/hate-crimes-2022-ireland-gardai-report>
- Fitzgerald, C. (2023, 8 Aug). Explainer: Why is the far-right targeting Ireland’s libraries? *The Journal*. <https://www.thejournal.ie/library-protests-ireland-6135746-Aug2023/>
- Giansiracusa, N. (2121, 15 Oct). Facebook uses deceptive math to hide its hate speech problem. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/facebooks-deceptive-math-when-it-comes-to-hate-speech/>
- Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press.



- Godzisz, P. & Viggiani, G. (2019). *Awareness of anti-LGBT hate crime in Europe*. Lambda Warsaw.
- Gorwa, R., Binns, R., & Katzenbach, C. (2020). Algorithmic content moderation: Technical and political challenges in the automation of platform governance. *Big Data & Society*, 7(1), 1-15.
- Guhl, J. & Davey, J. (2020). Hosting the 'holohoax': A snapshot of holocaust denial across social media. *The Institute for Strategic Dialogue*.
- Innes, H. & Innes, M. (2023). De-platforming disinformation: Conspiracy theories and their control. *Information, Communication & Society*, 26(6), 1262-1280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1994631>
- Heasman, A. (2023, 25 Jun). N/A. *Facebook*. <https://www.facebook.com/100088622358284/videos/172480498979574>
- The Santa Clara Principles: On transparency and accountability in Content Moderation. <https://santaclaraprinciples.org/>
- Jhaver, S., Boylston, C., Yang, D., & Bruckman, A. (2021). Evaluating the effectiveness of deplatforming as a moderation strategy on Twitter. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5(CSCW2), 1-30.
- Kirk, R. & Schill, D. (2024). Sophisticated hate stratagems: Unpacking the era of distrust. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 68(1), 3-25.
- Klein, E. (2018 July 20). The controversy over Mark Zuckerberg's comments on Holocaust denial, explained. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/explainers/2018/7/20/17590694/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-holocaust-denial-recode>
- Leidig, E. (2023). *The women of the far right: Social media influencers and online radicalization*. Columbia University Press.
- Linehan, A. (10 May 2023). Performers disappointed after carlow drag show cancelled following online complaints. *GCN*. <https://gcn.ie/carlow-drag-show-cancelled/>
- Mamié, R., Horta Ribeiro, M., & West, R. (2021). Are anti-feminist communities gateways to the far right? Evidence from Reddit and YouTube. *Proceedings of the 13th ACM Web Science Conference 2021*, 139-147.

- Martiny, C. & Lawrence, S. (2023). A year of hate: Anti-drag mobilization efforts targeting LGBTQ+ people in the US. *ISD*.
- McGreevy, R. (2023, 16 Sep). Rival protests over trans rights take place in Dublin city. *Irish Times*. <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/social-affairs/2023/09/16/rival-protests-over-trans-rights-take-place-in-dublin-city>
- META. *Hate speech: Policy details*. [https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/hatespeech/?source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fcommunitystandards%2Fhate\\_speech](https://transparency.fb.com/policies/community-standards/hatespeech/?source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fcommunitystandards%2Fhate_speech)
- Mudde, C. (2019). *The far right today*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Mulhall, J. (2019, 4 Oct). Deplatforming works: Let's get on with it. *Hope Not Hate*. <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2019/10/04/deplatforming-works-lets-get-on-with-it/>
- O'Connor, C. (2023, 12 Sep). First libraries, now schools are under attack for teaching about LGBTQ+ identities. *Irish Examiner*. <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-41224576.html>
- Peck, H. (2023, 20 Dec). Exposing social media platforms' failures to protect their users. *Global Witness*. <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/blog/exposing-social-media-platforms-failures-to-protect-their-users/>
- Rajan, B. & Venkatraman, S. (2021). Insta-hate: An exploration of Islamophobia and right-wing nationalism on Instagram amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in India. *Journal of Arab & Muslim Media Research*, 14(1), 71-91.
- Rauchfleisch, A. & Kaiser, J. (2021). Deplatforming the far-right: An analysis of YouTube and BitChute. *Available at SSRN 3867818*, 1-28.
- Rogers, R. (2020). Deplatforming: Following extreme Internet celebrities to Telegram and alternative social media. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(3), 213-229.
- Robertson, A. (2022, 5 Aug). Alex Jones must pay \$4.1 million for spreading Sandy Hook Conspiracy Theory. *The Verge*. <https://www.theverge.com/2022/8/4/23292425/alex-jones-sandy-hook-defamation-trial-verdict-fine>

- Rogers, R. (2020). Deplatforming: Following extreme Internet celebrities to Telegram and alternative social media. *European Journal of Communication*, 35(3), 213-229.
- Romano, A. (2016, 20 Jul). Milo Yiannopoulos's Twitter ban, explained. *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/20/12226070/milo-yiannopoulos-twitter-ban-explained>
- Saleem, H. M. & Ruths, D. (2018). The aftermath of disbanding an online hateful community. *arXiv preprint arXiv:1804.07354*.
- Saresma, T., Karkulehto, S., & Varis, P. (2020). Gendered violence online: Hate speech as an intersection of misogyny and racism. In *Violence, gender and affect: Interpersonal, institutional and ideological practices* (pp. 221-243). Springer.
- Sellnow, T. L., Parrish, A., & Semenas, L. (2019). From hoax as crisis to crisis as hoax: Fake news and information disorder as disruptions to the discourse of renewal. *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 2(1), 121-142.
- Slothouber, V. (2020). (De)trans visibility: Moral panic in mainstream media reports on de/retransition. *European Journal of English Studies*, 24(1), 89-99.
- Sontag, S. (1989). *AIDS and its metaphors*. New York.
- Urman, A. & Katz, S. (2022). What they do in the shadows: Examining the far-right networks on Telegram. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25(7), 904-923.
- Van Dijck, J., de Winkel, T., & Schäfer, M. T. (2023). Deplatformization and the governance of the platform ecosystem. *New Media & Society*, 25(12), 3438-3454.

