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# HEROES AND SCAPEGOATS

Right-wing Extremism in Digital Environments

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European Commission Directorate-General Justice and Consumers  
Directorate C – Fundamental rights and rule of law  
Unit C2 – Fundamental rights policy  
Email: [JUST-C2-CHARTE@ec.europa.eu](mailto:JUST-C2-CHARTE@ec.europa.eu)

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# **Heroes and Scapegoats**

## **Right-wing Extremism in Digital Environments**

This report was prepared by the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI). The research and the writing of the report was conducted by Dr Lisa Kaati, Ms Katie Cohen and Dr Björn Pelzer. Contributions were also made by Dr Amendra Shrestha, Ms Anna Stozek and Mr Frej Welander.

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# Abstract

This report is a study on different aspects of digital violent right-wing extremist (VRWE) content, i.e., textual or visual messages that express acceptance, condoning, justification or acclamation of violence for the sake of a radical nationalistic ideal. Radical nationalism can be categorised into racial nationalism (white supremacy or racism), cultural nationalism (e.g. arguing for homogeneity of language and culture within the Western nation states), or ethnic nationalism (e.g. arguing that people with different ethnic origins should not mix). The different strains of VRWE include identitarianism, counter-jihad, National Socialism, white supremacy, and eco-fascism. Emerging tactic strains include accelerationism, Siege culture and hive terrorism. The main aspects of VRWE content that are examined in this report are either target-oriented (i.e., toxic language including hate speech, dehumanizing language, and far-right conspiracy theories), or perpetrator oriented. (i.e., accelerationist ideas, glorification of war and terror, and assigning hero status to previous VRWE terrorists). We also map the online VRWE landscape, describing how VRWE content is expressed on different platforms.

# Key Findings

- On many platforms, there is a VRWE jargon, a characteristic way of using words, phrases and idioms that strengthens the participants' cohesion and sense of belonging. Much of this jargon has arisen out of need for avoiding content moderation algorithms.
- Dog whistling is a common strategy for avoiding responsibility for VRWE content. The coded language of VRWE is constantly evolving in a competition with the development of content moderation algorithms.
- VRWE propaganda contains a large amount of identity enforcing messages, often combined with violent ideation. European history and heritage, National Socialist symbols and beautiful Nordic scenery are recurring themes. References to popular culture are also used to make messages relatable. The violence enforcing messages mainly consist of romanticized pictures of armed men or weapons.
- Targeted toxic language (including but not limited to hate speech), dehumanization and conspiracy theories create conceptions about groups of people as enemies: threatening, malicious and of lesser value. These conceptions may serve to justify contempt, discrimination and violence.
- Toxic language usage is 5 to 15 times more common on platforms and forums that allow VRWE content. The most common targets are non-whites and Jews. Other frequent targets of hate are white 'traitors', public figures, secret enemies, women, Muslims, and people considered to be an active or passive part of the political 'mainstream'.
- Dehumanizing language erodes the moral inhibition to cause harm to a limited group of people. Dehumanizing language is especially prevalent on 4chan/pol/ and on 8kun/pnd/. Groups that are dehumanized include dark-skinned people, Jews and people in interracial relationships.
- On 4chan/pol/, discussions of New World Order conspiracy theories have spiked since the Covid-19 pandemic started. Anti-Jewish conspiracy theories have been steadily increasing since 2016.
- On 4chan/pol/ and 8kun/pnd/, past VRWE mass murderers are frequently portrayed as inspirational role-models and referred to as 'heroes' and 'saints'.
- National online RWE scenes influence each other across borders, adapting and incorporating ideas, memes and conspiracy theories into their respective national narratives.
- National laws are effective against locally hosted RWE platforms, with the effect that VRWE content moves to the global internet
- Minimal-moderation platforms are ostensibly dedicated to protecting free speech against censorship, but they often end up sheltering online RWE groups and individuals.

# Introduction

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# 1. Introduction

Extreme-right terrorism has been a growing threat in the West since the 2010s. According to IEP's 2020 Global Terrorism Index, there was only one recorded far-right terrorist attack in 2010, a number that by 2019 had increased to 49, with most attacks taking place in the last five years. The same report states that in North America, Western Europe, and Oceania, far-right attacks have increased by 250 per cent since 2014, with deaths increasing by 709 per cent over the same period.<sup>1</sup> Usually, these attacks are carried out by lone actors who have been active on social media during the planning phase, and sometimes also used the internet to disseminate their views and even documentation of the attacks themselves. This was the case when a terrorist in Halle, Germany livestreamed his failed attempt at a synagogue shooting and subsequent random shooting of civilians to a gaming platform using a GoPro camera mounted on his helmet. Most of the actors involved in far-right terrorism had not been part of a terrorist network, instead they were loosely tied to different online communities; mainly open platforms where they exchanged ideas and thoughts with like-minded people. This suggests that contemporary violent right-wing extremism (VRWE) does not rely as much on recruitment and radicalization in face-to-face interaction as it does on interaction on the internet.

Over the years, there have been technological and political changes that have also affected the landscape of online right-wing extremism. For instance, VRWE material is no longer confined to certain ideologically profiled sites. While old-style discussion forums such as Stormfront and VNN Forum (see Section 3.2) still exist and attract visitors, the younger followers tend to reside on platforms such as Gab, the Chans, or Parler; all parts of the so called 'free-speech' Internet, a collection of alternative platforms that oppose the censorship they claim to experience on established social media platforms. The general online scene has also shifted toward a participatory culture, where everyone can create and publish their own content. This is also true about the VRWE scene where user-generated propaganda has more or less replaced propaganda from organized groups. Thus, an understanding of the operations and technological changes on the internet is pivotal for combatting future VRWE violence.

## 1.1. Defining Features of VRWE

A scientific approach to VRWE is made difficult by the lack of consensus about how it should be defined. What is the defining factor that makes a right-wing ideology extremist? Very few people label themselves extremist, this is usually a label that comes from the outside. Within the environments we study, it is more common to identify as simply 'nationalist' or 'white nationalist'. The labelling of a group or person or idea as 'extremist' always rests a judgement about what is considered normal or mainstream. Thus, the delineation between the mainstream and the extreme varies over time and space (see for instance Section 3.4). Further, the concept has become highly politicized and value-laden and is regularly used all over the political spectrum as a slur to label one's opponents.

According to a popular definition proposed by Cas Mudde (2000), the far-right (including both the 'radical right' and the 'extreme right')<sup>2</sup> exhibits at least three of the following five features:

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace (2021). *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Sydney, <http://visionofhumanity.org/reports>.

<sup>2</sup> According to Ravndal (2017), the 'radical movements work for change within the framework of democracy whereas extremists reject democracy and are willing to use violence or other non-conventional means to achieve their goals.' See Ravndal, J.A. (2017). *Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*. PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2017.

nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy or strong state advocacy.<sup>3</sup> In his 2019 book,<sup>4</sup> Mudde states that while all far-right ideologies consider inequalities between people as something natural and positive, the extreme right is defined by its negative view on democracy as a form of governance and their preference for authoritarian rule. It follows that right-wing extremism contains both hierarchical and anti-democratic elements. Berntzen, Bjørgo and Ravndal's far-right typology also distinguishes between extreme and radical right, stating that the extreme right is defined by two ideas: that democracy must be replaced, and that violence against the enemies of the people is legitimate.<sup>5</sup> It follows that all right-wing extremism by this definition is VRWE.

Insofar as the aforementioned far-right typologies, with their distinctions between radical, extremist and violent extremist, can be useful in the physical world, they cannot readily be applied to the disorganized and incoherent landscape that online VRWE is. According to Maura Conway (2020), the contemporary extreme right is best described as a decentralized 'scene', 'milieu' or 'ecology', composed of a fast-changing and complex overlapping of individuals, groups, movements, political parties and media organs – of which very few are officially designated as terrorist groups in any jurisdiction.<sup>6</sup> Although some RWE groups, such as British Sonnenkrieg Division and Combat18, or German Sturmbrigade 44, are considered terrorist groups under the applicable national laws and in line with the definition of terrorist groups in the Terrorism Directive, very few of the violent RWE actors that have carried out terrorist attacks in the last ten years have been members or even supporters of a VRWE organization. The online VRWE scene contains a variety of both violent and non-violent movements and ideologies (some of these are described in Chapter 3), often used in various combinations to craft an individual pick-and-mix ideology. The ubiquitous overlaps between different VRWE ideologies and between VRWE ideologies and non-violent extreme-right and far-right ideologies makes the online VRWE scene difficult to study. While refraining from gratuitous labelling, we will have to accept a certain ambiguity and vagueness regarding the boundaries between the radical, extremist and violent extremist right.

In this report, keeping in line with the definitions made by Mudde, Berntzen, Bjørgo and Ravndal, we regard the legitimization of extra-parliamentary opposition through violence as the main defining feature of violent extremism. However, we do not include anti-democratic ideals in the definition, since many individuals who promote some kind of far-right or radical nationalist agenda do not necessarily have a thorough and consistent view on democracy, and sometimes even consider the current society undemocratic (see Section 5.3).

Further, we consider radical nationalism as the main tenet of right-wing extremist ideology. Right-wing extremist nationalism can be categorised into racial nationalism (white supremacy or racism), cultural nationalism (e.g. arguing that Western culture must be protected), or ethnic nationalism (e.g. arguing that people with different ethnic origins should not mix).<sup>7</sup>

This report is not about studying VRWE organisations, individuals or meeting places. What we study in this report is *VRWE content* as expressed in images and words in digital environments. What we refer to as VRWE content is textual or visual messages that express acceptance, condoning, justification or acclamation of radical nationalist ideological violence.

A platform or individual that hosts, produces or reproduces VRWE content should not by default be labelled as VRWE. The intention of posting a VRWE message may not be to express VRWE views. However, statements that are made online tend to lead their own lives, and it is the accumulated

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<sup>3</sup> Mudde, C. (2000). 'The Ideology of the Extreme Right', Oxford University Press.

<sup>4</sup> Mudde, C. (2019). 'The Far Right Today', John Wiley & Sons, p. 5–7.

<sup>5</sup> Bjørgo, T., & Ravndal, J. A. (2019). Extreme-right violence and terrorism: Concepts, patterns, and responses. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

<sup>6</sup> Conway, M. (2020). Routing the extreme right: challenges for social media platforms. *The RUSI Journal*, 165(1), 108–113.

<sup>7</sup> Bjørgo, T. & Aasland Ravndal, J. (2019) Extreme-Right Violence and Terrorism: Concepts, Patterns, and Responses. ICCT Policy Brief September 2019. ISSN: 2468-0486.

quantity of statements of a certain kind that will have an impact on the receiver. There is a constant exchange of ideas and terminology between violent and non-violent extremists, between radical-right and extremist-right. This makes it difficult to clearly distinguish one from another. Due to this exchange, we have included several non-VRWE digital environments in our mappings.

## 1.2. Ideological Strains of VRWE

The platforms, organisations, networks, movements, narratives and individuals of online VRWE are in constant flux. The newest emerging narratives and modes of expression are quite different from traditional VRWE. Mixed ideologies are increasingly common, as is ecological inspiration and accelerationism. Below is a short description of the different strains of contemporary VRWE, and how they differ in mode of expression and who they perceive as enemies.

### 1.2.1. Identitarianism

The Identitarian movement is a loosely tied together pan-European movement originating from France in the early 2000s (see Section 4.3). In time it has come to share values and tactics with its American counterpart the alt-right. The main tenet of identitarianism is *ethnopluralism*, the idea that different ethnic groups should live in separation from one another, that different cultural norms and traditions should develop without interference from other cultures. The dominating narrative of the identitarian movement is that the western world is threatened by immigration from other parts of the world (see ‘the Great Replacement’, Section 8.3).<sup>8</sup> The Identitarian movement is known for using a tactic called metapolitics, which is to seek to shift people’s understanding of society and hence the society’s culture before changing its politics. To a large extent this is executed by creating propaganda directed at a young audience.<sup>9</sup> The contemporary VRWE rhetoric is very much a product of the Identitarian movement’s opportunistic use of internet culture, using memes, trolling and references to popular culture in order to make their messages more palatable and make young people feel ‘at home’ in the movement.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.2.2. Counter-jihad and Anti-Muslim Sentiment

Counter-jihad is another kind of cultural nationalism, where the Muslim population of Europe is considered a threat against Western culture. As the Identitarian movement, Counter-jihad is mainly internet-based. After 9/11 and the London bombings 2005, islamophobia was growing in the West.<sup>11</sup> This coincided with the birth of the blog as a popular means of communication and gave rise to several counter-jihad outlets, which include Gates of Vienna, Jihadwatch, the Brussels journals and Atlas Shrugged. Norwegian counter-jihad blogger Fjordman became notorious following the terror attack at Utøya 2011, where he was frequently quoted and plagiarized in the attacker’s manifesto.<sup>12</sup>

However, unlike the Identitarian movement, the counter-jihad movement does not seem to have developed as much regarding their use of platforms and modes of expression. They do not rely on memes and irony as much as on lengthy arguments about the threat from Islam. From this tradition, anti-Muslim conspiracy theories based on the books *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*<sup>13</sup> and *Le Grand Replacement* from 2011 have emerged and been spread on the internet (see Section 8.3).

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<sup>8</sup> French, D. (2019) My Fellow Republicans Must Stand Against the Alt-right Virus Infecting America, Time Magazine, August 8.

<sup>9</sup> *Economist*. Racists in skinny jeans – meet the IB, Europe’s version of America’s alt-right, 12.11.2016.

<sup>10</sup> Hawley, G. (2017) *Making Sense of the Alt-right*, 2017. Columbia University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Sheridan, L. P. (2006). Islamophobia pre- and post-September 11th, 2001. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 21(3), 317-336.

<sup>12</sup> Leonard, C. H., Annas, G. D., Knoll IV, J. L., & Tørrissen, T. (2014). The case of Anders Behring Breivik—Language of a lone terrorist. *Behavioral sciences & the law*, 32(3), 408-422.

<sup>13</sup> Ye’or, B. (2005) *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.

### 1.2.3. National Socialism and White Supremacy

National Socialism is probably the most ubiquitously violent extremist strand of radical nationalism. Based on totalitarian ideals and blatant antisemitism, this ideology is carried forth by fringe organisations such as Atomwaffen/ Sonnenkrieg Division or Sturmbrigade 44. National Socialist vocabulary, such as 'lying press' or 'blood and soil' has moved beyond the pronouncedly National Socialist groups and can be found among for instance the alt-right.<sup>14</sup>

Just as National Socialism, white supremacy is a kind of racial nationalism that builds on the assumption that humankind can be divided into races and that there is a natural hierarchy between different races, where the white race is on top. Originating in the US in the 1980's, the white supremacy movement is organized around the principle of leaderless resistance, a strategy where individuals or small cells acting on their own orders use violent actions to create disorder in society. Leaderless resistance is a predecessor to lone actor terrorism. In the US, there is a close connection between White supremacists and the Militia Movement, resulting in a weaponized pseudo-military movement. According to a report from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), the European far-right is shifting toward a focus on racial identity, sometimes called an 'internationalization of white supremacy'.<sup>15</sup>

### 1.2.4. Emerging Strains of VRWE

A feature shared among several contemporary radical nationalist movements is *accelerationism*. In this context, accelerationism means trying to accelerate the downfall of the modern society through repeated actions that create disruption and fragmentation of societal structures. Strategies for acceleration include, among others, sabotage, murder terror attacks and mass shootings. The goal is to build a different kind of society upon the ruins of the previous one.<sup>16</sup> Accelerationist ideas are closely connected to *Siege culture*, an online subculture centred around the 1992 book *Siege*, by American National Socialist James Mason. The book propagates for leaderless violent actions that will provoke a race war and eventually lead to the demise of the political system as we know it. The Siege subculture has manifested in the spreading of messages, memes and 'inspirational' quotes promoting Siege on different platforms (see section 0).

Another emerging VRWE ideology is *eco-fascism*, a concept that has been highlighted by media following the 2019 terror attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, where the perpetrator self-identified as eco-fascist. Eco-fascism, an ideology with roots in National Socialism and European 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalism, is characterized by a negative view of modernity, romantic nationalism, and drastic solutions for population control. In addition, it contains accelerationist ideas that risk having their outlet in violent actions. There is no cohesive eco-fascist movement or ideology; largely the eco-fascist scene consists of a scattering of individuals and groups that combine a more or less extreme nationalism with an environmentalist rhetoric, while not necessarily describing themselves as eco-fascists.<sup>17</sup> Historically, extremist groups have often incorporated current themes into their ideologies in order to gain more supporters and sympathies. Thus, in a time of increasing public concern about the effects of global warming, it may be opportunistic to incorporate environmental commitment into a radical nationalist ideology.

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<sup>14</sup> ISD (2020). Trans-Atlantic Journeys of Far-Right Narratives through Online Media Ecosystems. Institute for Strategic Dialogue, December 2020.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Loadenthal, M., Hausserman, S. & Thierry, M. (2020). Accelerating Hate: Atomwaffen ionion, Contemporary Digital Fascism, and Insurrectionary Accelerationism. I *Cyber Hate: Examining the Functions and Impact of White Supremacy in Cyberspace*, red. Valeri, R. M. och Borgeson, K. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Kaati, L., Cohen, K. Pelzer, B., Fernquist, J. & Sarnecki, P. H. (2021) Ecofascism. En studie av propaganda i digitala miljöer. [Eco-fascism. A Study of Propaganda in Digital Environments.] FOI Memo 7441. Swedish Defence Research Agency.

In 2018, Daniel Koehler, founding Director of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-Radicalization Studies (GIRDS), noted a new type of fluid and temporary VRWE network, where previously unconnected people mobilize to perform an action, terrorist act or violent hate crime, after which they quickly disperse again. This tactic, called *hive terrorism*, is designed to be overlooked and misinterpreted by security agencies.<sup>18</sup> These actions, if marketed well, can also mobilize activists from mainstream society and thus allow for large-scale operations.

### 1.3. Outline

In this report, we will focus on VRWE content on different kinds of platforms where such is likely to occur. It is important to stress that a platform or individual that produces or reproduces VRWE content should not by default be labelled as a VRWE, nor should producers of VRWE messages automatically be labelled VRWEs, since their intentions and reasons for posting will remain obscure. The inclusion criteria for platforms to appear in this report is that they, at some point, to some extent, allow VRWE content.

In Chapter 2, we describe the methods used in our analyses. In Chapters 3 and 4, we map the landscape of digital environments that attract proponents of VRWE, globally as well as locally in a sample of European countries or regions. In Chapter 5, we present four case studies that show what can be learned from studying VRWE communication style. Chapter 6 examines the prevalence of toxic language, i.e., severe degradation of a group or person, in several online environments. In Chapter 7, we compare four different platforms with respect to their degree and targets of dehumanization. Chapter 8 studies some of the most well-spread VRWE conspiracy theories and how they have evolved over time on 4chan/pol/. In Chapter 9, several aspects of glorification of VRWE violence are discussed and examined. Finally, Chapter 10 contains some concluding remarks and directions for future work.

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<sup>18</sup> Koehler, D. (2018). Recent trends in German right-wing violence and terrorism: what are the contextual factors behind 'hive terrorism?'. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 12(6), p. 72-88.



# Analysing Digital Environments

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## 2. Analysing Digital Environments

### 2.1. Collecting and Storing Data

While the digital space provides RWE with possibilities to communicate, it also provides researchers and analysts with new possibilities to study the online behaviour of RWE, as well as what and how they communicate. The large amount of online content brings both opportunities and challenges. Manual analyses of all data are not feasible due to the unmanageable scale. However, various forms of computer support can be employed, covering many different technologies and methods that facilitate the task: from simpler forms of text analysis that count occurrences of certain words to advanced algorithms where artificial intelligence is used to perform parts of the analysis. The remainder of this chapter will present some of the technologies that have been used in this report.

When investigating a digital environment on the internet the first step is to download and store its contents in a database. This is a necessary step, since analysing data 'live' directly is fraught with difficulties: Platforms differ greatly in how they present their content, down to minor details like the formatting of dates, and usually they provide neither statistics nor the means for advanced queries needed for a deep analysis, like counting the number of posts made during a specific interval. Thus all the contents first have to be retrieved, which is done by a web crawler that automatically navigates through the digital space, following subforums and discussion threads. Some social media platforms have interfaces that make it easier to collect data this way. Others put up barriers to make it difficult for external parties to download data, by adding functionality that tries to detect web crawlers and to prevent such automated access the platform. The structure of digital spaces differs and therefore web crawlers need to be designed specifically for each individual space. Once the data has been retrieved it can be structured in a uniform format and stored in a database. This makes the data searchable and easier to analyse, and it facilitates the comparison of different digital spaces.

When the data is stored in a database, various statistics about the data can be obtained, for example the number of posts, or how many users were publishing posts at a given time. Statistics about visitors to a webpage (i.e. people who read, but who do not necessarily post themselves) on the other hand can be retrieved using web analysis tools such as SimilarWeb<sup>19</sup> or Alexa.<sup>20</sup> Commercial web analysis tools provide visitor information from several different sources: the owner of the websites, from a network of contributors, from internet providers and from their own collections of data.

Apart from webpage statistics, there are several other approaches to analyse online data using computer supported computational and statistical methods. A common difficulty when analysing different digital environments is that each environment is unique with respect to language use and ways of expression. Words have different meanings depending on the context in which they occur. This means that in many cases the algorithms used for analysis need to be adapted to the specific domain (e.g. platform, subculture or ideology) that is analysed. This is one of the reasons why the results of commercial tools that are developed to work on all domains might be unsatisfying.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.similarweb.com/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.alexa.com/>

## 2.2. Text Analysis

Text analysis is the process of automatically classifying and extracting meaningful information from unstructured text. One of the most common and simplest approaches to text analysis is to use dictionary-based methods. Such methods have been used to analyse a wide range of concepts including emotions, sentiment, psychological traits and hate speech. Dictionary-based methods are easy to understand, but they also have several drawbacks. One is that words may have several different meanings depending on the context in which they appear.<sup>21</sup> Another criticism of dictionary-based approaches is that the dictionaries often are defined without any consideration of the properties of the actual data. This makes the method sensitive to vocabulary variation such as slang, different spellings, domain-specific terminology, and homonymy (the same word having different meanings). Yet another issue is that dictionary-based approaches cannot detect sarcasm or humour. Moreover, the dictionaries require constant updates since new terminology and slang tend to develop quickly in social media.<sup>22</sup>

## 2.3. Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is a collective name for systems or programs that exhibit intelligent behaviour. The intelligence is achieved by using algorithms and techniques such as machine learning (ML) in which the system is trained until it reaches a certain level of intelligence. When using machine learning there are two different aspects that determine how intelligent a system can be: the quality of training data and the amount of training data.

When applying ML-technologies for text analysis, the goal is often to create a model that can be used for different classification tasks. This means that we have to provide the algorithms with training examples that are used to learn how to classify a text. Tens of thousands of such examples can be necessary in order to achieve good training results, an amount not easily procured. The research community sometimes provides suitable datasets in online repositories like Kaggle<sup>23</sup>, or competitions like PAN.<sup>24</sup> Such external resources must be utilized with care, as they may differ from the intended training outcome - e.g. different hate speech training sets may be based on different definitions of hate speech. Furthermore, resources in languages other than English tend to be sparse, and machine learning is even sensitive to subtle differences within a language: A classifier trained on examples from Facebook may be less effective at analysing Twitter. All this means that extensive datasets may have to be curated before training, or even augmented by own annotation efforts, all of which requires costly manual labour.

Once sufficient training data is available, a machine learning model suitable for text analysis can be trained. One such type are *distributional semantic models* (or *word embeddings*). The basic idea is that words that are used and occur in the same context tend to have similar meanings. This can be measured using a metrics called *semantic similarity* which represents the distance between two words based on the similarity of the contexts they are used in. Distributional semantic models can be trained largely unsupervised with unstructured text, or with annotated training examples. The former simplifies obtaining training data, as the model can be fed with virtually any raw text from the area of interest, such as an internet forum. The trained model is most suitable for an analysis of the overall

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<sup>21</sup> Mehl, M., Robbins, M. & Holleran, S. (2013) How taking a word for a word can be problematic: Context-dependent linguistic markers of extraversion and neuroticism. *J. Methods Meas. Soc. Sci.* 3.

<sup>22</sup> Nobata, C., Tetreault, J., Thomas, A., Mehdad, Y., & Chang, Y. (2016) Abusive Language Detection in Online User Content. In *Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on World Wide Web, Republic and Canton of Geneva, CHE*, 145-153.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.kaggle.com>

<sup>24</sup> <https://pan.webis.de>

characteristics of the language in a digital space, e.g. for exploring the jargon, which words are favoured in which context. A model to be used as a classifier on the other hand must be trained with annotated data to teach it the categories of text, leading to the aforementioned difficulties in sourcing sufficient data.

In recent years, machine learning-based text classification has made substantial progress using *language models*, which combine unsupervised learning of raw text with supervised learning of annotated examples. Utilizing concepts very similar to the word embeddings above, an extensive neural network is first trained on millions of texts (such as Wikipedia, books and news articles) to create a broad semantic representation of the given language. Further training with annotated examples can then turn the language model into a classifier. The underlying language representation gained in the first stage aids the classifier training in the second stage (*transfer learning*), and the resulting classifier will in general outperform earlier methods, despite requiring less of the costly annotated training samples. A drawback is that the first stage is extremely computationally intensive, making it prohibitive to most interested parties. Therefore, efforts in the research community usually focus on the second stage, fine-tuning one of the existing language models that have been created and shared by companies like Google or large academic institutions. In Chapter 6 we will use a language model that we have trained to recognize toxic language.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.4. Challenges and Limitations of Machine Learning

Despite the remarkable recent advances in machine learning one must stay aware that the resulting systems still lack a fundamental understanding of the meaning of the data that they process. Regarding text analysis even the best systems do not reach a human-level accuracy, and the cases where they err can appear blatantly obvious to a human observer. Also, as mentioned in the previous section, subtle differences between training data and real-world input can affect the performance in ways that are difficult to predict. Research papers tend to evaluate their systems on curated test data taken from the same source as the training samples, and one cannot necessarily expect the resulting performance to carry over onto other data ‘in the wild’. All in all one should not blindly trust the results of an ML-based classifier.

Unfortunately, ML-systems, and in particular those using deep learning, can often be characterized as a ‘black box’ – their inner workings are too abstract and too complex for human inspection and comprehension, and the user can only hope that the output is reasonable. This differs from more traditional rule-based AI methods, which are capable of elaborate proofs for their reasoning, but which cannot match the performance of machine learning. Explainable AI (XAI) is the field of research investigating means of making the results of AI systems comprehensible to their users. There is some progress in making ML-based text analysis explainable,<sup>26</sup> including word embeddings<sup>27</sup> and even enormous language models,<sup>28</sup> but none of these are suitable for large scale verification of results needed when analysing social media.

We therefore consider machine learning to be no more and no less than a valuable first filter, which we use to reduce the amount of text to be analysed, but whose results we eventually verify by hand. Given a particular textual phenomenon of interest, e.g. hate speech, the margin of error of a classifier can be tweaked in such way that the system is likely to find almost all such occurrences while only

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<sup>25</sup> Berglind, T., Pelzer, B., & Kaati, L. (2019). Levels of Hate in Online Environments. In IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining (ASONAM), Vancouver, BC, Canada, 2019 pp. 842-847

<sup>26</sup> Danilevsky, M., Qian, K., Aharonov, R., Katsis, Y., Kawas, B., Sen, P. (2020). A Survey of the State of Explainable AI for Natural Language Processing. AACL-IJCNLP 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Qureshi, M.A., Greene, D. (2019). EVE: explainable vector based embedding technique using Wikipedia. J Intell Inf Syst 53, 137–165. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10844-018-0511-x>

<sup>28</sup> Hoover, B., Strobel, H., Gehrmann, S. (2020). exBERT: A Visual Analysis Tool to Explore Learned Representations in Transformer Models. ACL (demo) 2020: 187-196.

flagging a manageable amount of texts erroneously, leaving it to the manual reviewer to discard the false positives. The size of modern digital spaces means that even with the support of machine learning some representative sampling is unavoidable to make the analysis feasible.

## **2.5. Ethical Concerns in Data Analysis**

Monitoring of peoples' communication, even in public or semi-public spaces like open digital platforms, requires a certain sensitivity regarding the monitored individual's right to integrity. Basically, there is a conflict between the individual's need for privacy and the individual's need for protection from the potentially harmful consequences of certain digital interactions. The legal restrictions for surveillance are constantly shifting as they adapt to developments and changes of new technologies and threats.

Within this study, texts are analysed without the consent of their authors. It is not possible to obtain such consent given the number of writers who have produced text in the online environments that we analyse, especially given that people tend to write anonymously. To protect the integrity of the authors, we have retrieved data only from sources that are open and accessible to all, i.e., sources where the content can be seen without any login or membership. No data has been collected from password-protected pages, closed Facebook pages, or other types of websites or social media where the user has taken any measure to keep posted material within a closed circle. Upon retrieval, the usernames will be anonymized and the textual content, the time of publication and in which forum the publication took place will be stored. This is to protect potentially sensitive personal data that might be contained by the downloaded data. Further, all data is stored on computers located on the premises of the Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI), where only persons who are employed at FOI, have security clearance and appropriate data protection and confidentiality training will have access to data. The research results are reported in anonymised and aggregated form to avoid analysis and reporting of accidentally obtained indirect personal data. No data will be passed on to another party.



# The Online Violent Right-Wing Extremism Scene

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## 3. The Online Violent Right-Wing Extremism Scene

### 3.1. VRWE Online

In this Chapter we will present a sample of online environments that contain VRWE content. The sample is presented more or less chronologically, as a historical review, and chosen to represent different facets of the overall extremist right-wing online environment. The sample consists of discussion forums, news sites and social network sites dedicated to VRWE ideologies, as well as more general platforms that among other material also contain VRWE material. The environments differ from one another with regards to size and number of visitors as well as ideological focus. The common denominator for these environments is that they all to some degree tolerate VRWE messages, i.e., textual or visual messages that accept, condone, excuse or embrace ideological extra-parliamentary violence for the sake of some nationalistic ideal.

It should be noted that not all platforms in this chapter should be labelled VRWE. Many platforms containing VRWE messages are pronouncedly libertarian or politically independent. It should also be noted that while the sample selection is based on accessibility, reach and topicality, all of which are determining factors for impact, the rapid change in the online scene means that some of the platforms included in this chapter may not stay relevant for long. Some of the included platforms are already shut down but are included for their relevance to the development of the online VRWE scene. There are also likely to exist some other platforms that should have been included but have been overlooked on account of being small, obscure or non-existent at the time of writing. Many of the larger social media platforms are not included in our analyses of the online VRWE scene, even though VRWE content is likely to be present on all large platforms, irrespective of policies against hate speech and other forms of harmful content. The reason for not including the larger social media platforms is that there are several technological as well as ethical obstacles that makes them difficult to analyse.

### 3.2. Forums and Websites

Since the early days of the internet, right-wing extremists have been quick to adopt online tools and exploit the power of social media.<sup>29</sup> In the mid-1990s when the internet became accessible to the general public, the white supremacy discussion forum *Stormfront* was launched.<sup>30</sup> On its front page Stormfront describes itself as a community of ‘racial realists, idealists and white nationalists’. Stormfront is the oldest existing white supremacy forum, and it claims to have around 360,000 members. The discussion forum contains around 13 million posts in a line-up of subforums – some of them regional/national for languages other than English (e.g. French, Spanish, Nordic).

In late 2001, a discussion forum called The Vanguard National News Forum (*VNN Forum*) was launched as an uncensored forum for ‘white’ people. While it has considerably less activity than Stormfront with approximately 1.6 million posts in total, it is still active and new posts are made

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<sup>29</sup> Conway, M., Scrivens, R., MacNair, L. (2019) Right-Wing Extremists’ Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends. ICCT Policy Brief. ISSN: 2468-0486

<sup>30</sup> Burris, V., Smith, E., & Strahm, A. (2000) White supremacist networks on the internet. *Sociological Focus*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 215–235.

every day. VNN Forum hosts messages that promote violence and celebrate mass murderers and terrorists as heroes. The content is often antisemitic (see Section 6.2). For example, one discussion thread published pictures and names of Jewish students and staff at two American universities; the schools reported the page to the FBI and the discussion thread was deleted.<sup>31</sup> On Stormfront there are discussions about how VNN Forum has become a refuge for former Stormfront users who were banned for expressing views too extreme even for Stormfront.

While discussion forums have played an important role for the online RWE scene, there are also traditional websites with a prominent role in forming the landscape. One of the most well-known websites is *The Daily Stormer* that was founded in 2013. The Daily Stormer gained publicity after publishing abusive comments about the woman who was killed in connection with the *Unite the Right* gathering in Charlottesville in August 2017. The publishing led to a shut-down of the website, and since all major internet service providers refused to host the site, it moved to the Dark Web. After a change of provider and address The Daily Stormer is (at the time of writing) online again.

*Gates of Vienna* is a website that is part of the counter-jihad movement. The site publishes texts from a variety of writers including Fjordman (who was a source of inspiration for Anders Behring Breivik). The name of the website refers to the siege of Vienna in 1683, when the fortunes of war turned for the Ottoman Empire and its expansion into Europe. Gates of Vienna hosts descriptions of the historical development of the counter-jihad movement and information about European counter-jihad conferences.

The European Identitarian movement also makes use of websites in their online presence. *Defend Evropa* is a website that claims to give its readers uncensored Eurocentric news and opinions. The website has published around 2,000 articles since 2016. The organization behind the website - Defend Europe - received some attention in the news when they crowd-funded more than 87,000 euros to charter a boat, which they then used to blockade Europe-bound boats carrying refugees and migrants in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>32</sup>

In 2011 the forum *Iron March* was founded. The forum was shut down in November 2017, but during its six years of activity it served as a meeting spot for national socialists and white supremacist groups.<sup>33</sup> In 2019 data from Iron March was leaked and personal information about the 1,200 members was exposed.<sup>34</sup> Members of Iron March aimed to destroy liberal democracy through a fascist paramilitary insurgency, and they were also a part of developing the accelerationist terrorist group *Atomwaffen Division* (Nuclear Weapons Division) that has been responsible for murders, an assassination attempt, and failed bomb plots.<sup>35</sup> Apart from Atomwaffen Division, at least 8 different national socialist or white supremacist groups were active on Iron March, including the United Kingdom-based and now banned *National Action*, the Scandinavian *Nordic Resistance Movement*, and the Australian *Antipodean Resistance*.<sup>36</sup> In April 2018 the site *Fascist Forge* emerged as a replacement for Iron March. Fascist Forge was an online ideological and social environment with members who subscribed to a radical interpretation of fascism that is not directly aligned with any specific group. Fascist Forge was inspired by the works of James Mason, including a series of essays he wrote in the 1980s which later was collected in the volume *Siege*.<sup>37</sup>

As an alternative to Wikipedia, *Metapedia* - an alternative encyclopaedia - was launched in 2014. Metapedia is available in 20 languages including Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, Italian, Danish,

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<sup>31</sup> McDonald, L. (September 4, 2019) Universities contact FBI after hundreds of photos of Jewish students and staff are published on white nationalist website that calls for 'extermination' of Jews. Daily Mail.

<sup>32</sup> Al Jazeera Staff (17 Jul 2017) Defend Europe boat tries to block migrant rescues. Al Jazeera

<sup>33</sup> Guhl, J., Ebner, J., and Rau, J. (2020). The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right, ISD, London, Washington, DC Beirut, Toronto.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ross, A. R., Bevenssee, E. (2019). Transnational White Terror: Exposing Atomwaffen And The Iron March Networks. Bellingcat. 19 Dec. 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Singer-Emerly, J., and Bray, R. (2020) The Iron March Data Dump Provides a Window Into How White Supremacists Communicate and Recruit. Lawfare. February 27, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Lee, B., and Knott, K. (2021) Fascist aspirants: Fascist Forge and ideological learning in the extreme-right online milieu, Behavioral Sciences of Terrorism and Political Aggression.

and Swedish. The content and the size of each national variant of Metapedia varies – the English Metapedia consists of close to 5,000 articles, while the Swedish Metapedia contains almost 11,000 articles. The Swedish instance of Metapedia has been reported for violation of the law covering the protection of personal integrity after publishing a list of purported Jews and Jewish-owned companies.

**3.2.1. Analysis: The Users on Stormfront**

In addition to an active discussion forum, Stormfront, a self-described community of ‘racial realists, idealists and white nationalists’, provides daily radio broadcasts, blogs and chat opportunities. Several well-known violent offenders are, or have been, active on Stormfront. In June 2021, Stormfront had 319 000 visitors per month. Most visitors were from English-speaking countries: United States (48.8%), United Kingdom (6.19%), and Canada (3.05%). The European countries that had most visitors to Stormfront were Finland (6.03%), Germany (1.04%), Netherlands (0.98%), Lithuania (0.92%), Poland (0.88%), Bulgaria (0.81%), Italy (0.75%), Sweden (0.71%), France (0.64%), Bosnia and Herzegovina( 0.64%), Spain (0.53%), Portugal (0.26%), Denmark (0.26%), Norway (0.35%), Greece (0.26%), Belgium (0.25%), and Croatia (0.23%).

Between 2001 and 2020, a total of 151 877 users were active posters on Stormfront. From 2001 the number of users increased but after 2009 a significant decrease in the number of users on Stormfront was noted (see Figure 1).

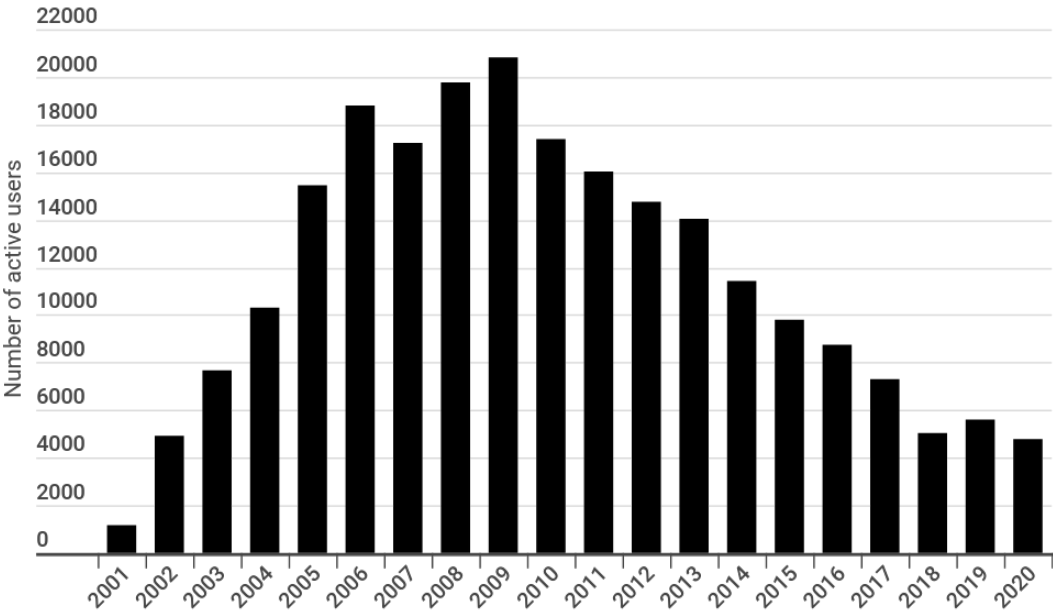


Figure 1. Number of users posting content every year on Stormfront.

Most of the users on Stormfront are active for a short time period (see Figure 2). Around 80% of the users have been active for less than one year and 17% between 1-5 years, 2.9% between 6-10 years and less than 0.1% for more than 11 years.

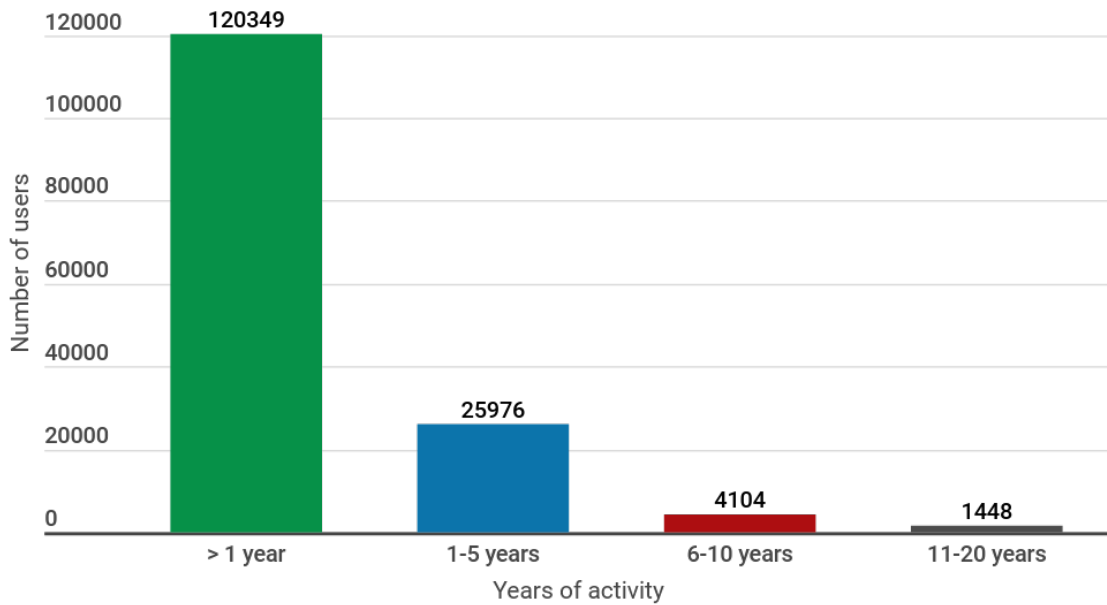


Figure 2. The time period a user is active posting content on Stormfront.

Some users on Stormfront are also active on other forums. VNN Forum and Stormfront have 1386 shared usernames. While there is no guarantee that the same individual has the same username on the two different forums it is likely that at least some of the individuals are active on Stormfront are also active on VNN Forum. Figure 3 illustrates the scale of the overlap.

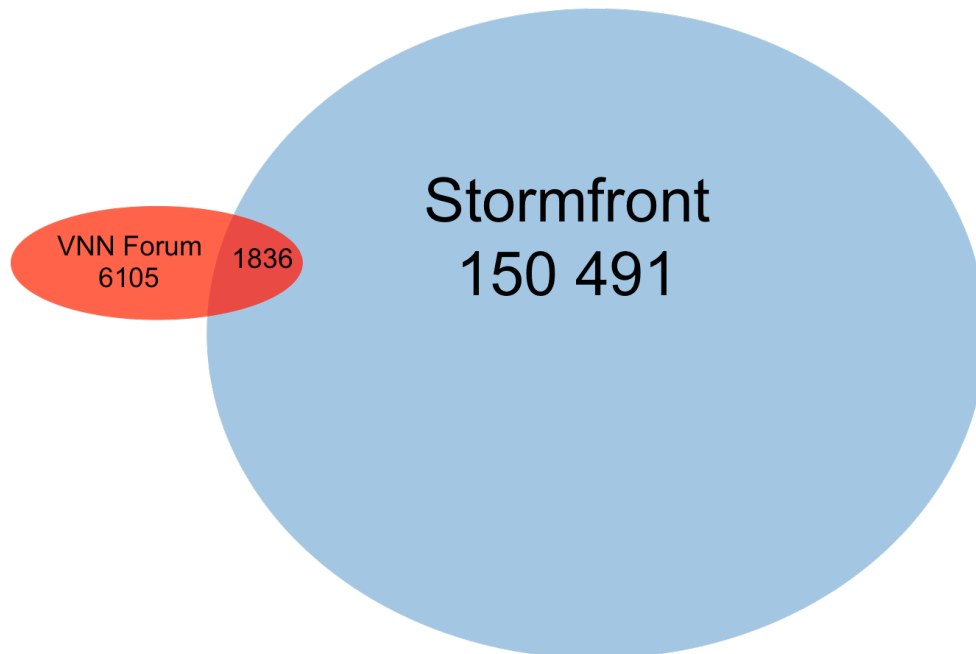


Figure 3. The overlap of usernames on Stormfront and VNN Forum.

### 3.3. The First Social Media Platforms

With the development of social media, the internet landscape changed from consisting of mostly websites and forums to hosting a number of large social media platforms. YouTube and Reddit were launched in 2005, and one year later Facebook and Twitter followed. Facebook is now one of the most visited sites on the web with 2.8 billion users.<sup>38</sup> In January 2021, the most popular social media platforms were Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and WeChat.

The introduction of social media platforms with their large user base provided extremist networks and organisations with new opportunities for recruitment of supporters. While it is difficult to estimate the amount of VRWE content on any of the major social media platforms, there have been some attempts to estimate the presence of specific groups, organizations and movements.

In 2016, the European Commission together with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Microsoft agreed on a 'Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online',<sup>39</sup> aiming to prevent and counter the spread of illegal hate speech online. Since then, Instagram, Snapchat, Dailymotion, Jeuxvideo.com, and TikTok have also joined the initiative. The Code of conduct requests the platforms to implement rules and community standards that forbid hate speech and to have systems and teams to review any possible violative content that is reported to them. While the rules and community standards as well as the level of moderation differ between the major social media platforms, the increased moderation has pushed individuals engaging in VRWE to move to other, less restrictive platforms, platforms with minimal moderation.<sup>40</sup>

### 3.4. Minimal Moderation Platforms

When major social media platforms increased their efforts to counter hate speech, a diversity of minimal moderation platforms appeared. The minimal moderation platforms often brand themselves as 'free speech' platforms allowing any content as long as it is legal. The minimal moderation platforms differs when it comes to what kind of content they allow. Some of the minimal moderation platforms have been in partnership with European law enforcement to remove certain content (e.g. propaganda from terrorist groups such as IS) while others refuse to collaborate with law enforcement.

Perhaps the most famous minimal moderation platforms are the *Chans* – a set of imageboards that allow users to post images and comments anonymously. Several violent far-right attacks in recent years have an apparent connection with Chan-culture, and attackers have uploaded manifestos as well as live streams of attacks to different Chan-sites. On the imageboards, the attackers have gained support from the community and been glorified as heroes.<sup>41</sup> The most well-known Chans are *4chan* and *8chan*, but there are several other Chans such as *Endchan*, and *16chan*. To publish on a Chan it is not necessary to have an account, which means that users can be completely anonymous. This and the fact that posts are regularly deleted after three days makes these boards challenging to analyse. In particular, it makes it impossible to estimate the number of active writers. According to its own statement, 4chan has over 43 million unique visitors per month<sup>42</sup> and around one million posts are made to the forum daily. One of 4chans most active subforums<sup>43</sup> is */pol/* ('politically incorrect'). This

<sup>38</sup> Statistics about the number of Facebook users 4th quarter of 2020 from <https://www.statista.com>

<sup>39</sup>[https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-code-conduct-countering-illegal-hate-speech-online_en)

<sup>40</sup> 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.

<sup>41</sup> Crawford, B., Keen, F., Suarez de-Tangil, G. (2020) Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Cultures. CREST Center for Research and Evidence on Security Threats

<sup>42</sup> Statistics from SimilarWeb, based on data collected between April- June.

<sup>43</sup> Almost 5 million posts are made to */pol/* each month

subforum is the origin of several conspiracy theories and the QAnon movement. In 2013, 8chan was launched as an alternative to 4chan, because 4chan was considered to be too restrictive by some. The ambition was that 8chan would allow all kinds of conversations no matter how hateful they were - as long as they were not illegal. In 2019, the suspected shooters of at least three mass shootings posted manifestos on 8chan, which forced 8chan offline for a period since internet providers refused to work with the site. In November 2019 8chan re-appeared under the new name *8kun*.

Another Chan-site is *Endchan*, a board that calls itself 'the imageboard at the end of the universe'.<sup>44</sup> Endchan got attention in 2020, when it became known that the Norwegian Philip Manshaus, convicted for a shooting at a mosque near Oslo, had been active on Endchan where he also posted a link to a livestream of his deed.<sup>45</sup> The user rules on the Endchan/pol/ board state that Jews are not allowed on the board and that users 'Insulting National Socialism or Hitler or promoting Jews' will be banned.

In 2017 the social media platform *Gab* was launched. Gab's functionality is very similar to Twitter, and the platform officially presents itself as a 'free speech' alternative to other social media. Approximately 10 million posts are made on Gab per year. The number of members is unclear; our estimations are around 500,000 with a considerably smaller core of 20,000 users publishing the bulk of the posts. Gab features posts written in many different languages. The site actively blocks attempts at automatic data analysis, which may hamper a complete retrieval. Being a technology forward platform, Gab makes use of modern web technologies and experiments with browser extensions, hosting methods and cryptocurrencies. In 2019 Gab evaded shutdown attempts by moving to a decentralized hosting method, although as of mid-2020 the platform appears to be centrally hosted again.

*Parler* is another minimal moderation platform that was launched in August 2018. Parler marketed itself as a free speech-focused and unbiased alternative to major social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. After the storming of the U.S. Capitol, Parler was identified as one of the social media services that was used for the planning, and it was closed down on January 11 after Amazon withdrew the web hosting services for the platform.<sup>46</sup> Parler returned online on February 15, 2021.

As an alternative to YouTube, the video sharing platform *BitChute* was launched in 2017. BitChute was the first low moderation platform with focus on video content.<sup>47</sup> The functionality of BitChute is similar to YouTube, but with less stringent moderation. It hosts the contents of creators whose videos were being blocked on larger video-sharing sites such as YouTube,<sup>48</sup> and it advertises its services on Gab. A recent study showed that the 20 most popular videos on BitChute contained extreme racist propaganda, Holocaust denial, and antisemitism.<sup>49</sup> BitChute has been accused of hosting terrorist material, despite their own community guidelines prohibiting content produced by terrorist organisations.<sup>50</sup> BitChute has been identified as one of the four key online platforms used by the British extreme right, together with Gab, Telegram and 4chan.<sup>51</sup>

*Reddit* is one of the world's largest discussion forums. It is organized in tens of thousands of forums called 'subreddits', which cover a broad range of different topics such as news, politics, religion, science, movies, video games, music, books, sports, fitness, cooking, pets, and image-sharing. While Reddit has community rules and moderation, there have been some infamous subreddits that have hosted VRWE content.

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<sup>44</sup> Liyanage, C. (2020) Endchan: narratives of the Chanosphere. Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right.

<sup>45</sup> Gonzalez, O. (2019). 8chan, 8kun, 4chan, Endchan: What you need to know. CNET. November 7, 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Jee, C. (January 11, 2021) Amazon has pulled Parler offline. MIT Technology Review.

<sup>47</sup> Trujillo, M., Buntain, C., Horne, B.D., (2020) What is BitChute? Characterizing the "Free Speech" Alternative to YouTube. In HT '20: 31st ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media, July 13–15, 2020, Orlando, FL. ACM, New York, NY, USA.

<sup>48</sup> Guhl, J., Ebner, J., and Rau, J. (2020). The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right, ISD, London, Washington, DC Beirut, Toronto.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, G. (2020) BitChute Platforming hate and terror in the UK. Hope not Hate.

<sup>50</sup> CST (2020) Hate fuel. The hidden online world fuelling far right terror. Community Security Trust (CST)

<sup>51</sup> Counter Extremism Project (2020) Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures

One such subreddit (that is now banned from Reddit) was *r/The\_Donald*, which hosted discussions in support of the former US president Donald Trump. *r/The\_Donald* was banned in June 2020 for violating Reddit rules on harassment and targeting. The maintainers of *r/The\_Donald* had already prepared a backup site under its own domain *TheDonald.win*, and the operation continued there independent of Reddit. Some of the planning of the storming of the US Capitol occurred on *TheDonald.win*. Disagreements caused a rift between the maintainers in late January 2021; *TheDonald.win* was shut down by its owner, whereas members who wished to continue created the similar forum *Patriots.win*. Despite the new ownership, different domain name and loss of the original posts, the new forum keeps referring to itself as *The Donald*. It remains active at the time of this writing.

As a reaction to the increased moderation on Reddit, a functionally similar minimal-moderation platform called *Voat* was launched in 2014. The site was frequented by believers in the QAnon conspiracy theories. *Voat* struggled with denial-of-service attacks and financial difficulties, and it was shut down in late 2020.

MeWe is a social network with functionality similar to Facebook, but with a focus on privacy and less stringent moderation. The site owners do not promote any ideology (unlike e.g. Gab) and moderate against 'content that is hateful, threatening, harmful, incites violence,<sup>52</sup> and it has a diverse membership, including pro-democracy activists in Hong Kong, but the light approach to moderation enforcement has also allowed online RWE groups to find shelter.

VK (VKontakte) is another social network. While hosted in Russia and one of the most popular Russian sites, it supports around 80 languages, including many European ones. Officially VK prohibits posts that, among other things, promote violence and racism. However, moderation of Western RWE is lax, and VK hosts groups like the Ku Klux Klan, and until recently also the Swedish Nordic Resistance Movement.

*Telegram* is an encrypted messaging service that was founded in 2013. On Telegram, users can establish channels that other users can follow, effectively providing communication hubs for groups. Content can be shared, and conversations can take place openly in public channels. Those who want more privacy can message one another through private chats. This dual functionality has made Telegram attractive to extremist groups.<sup>53</sup> Telegram regulates content by moderating publicly viewable material and removes channels that violate their Terms of Service but several studies have shown the presence of extremist groups. In 2019 researchers identified 636 pro-IS Telegram channels and groups with English language content,<sup>54</sup> and in 2020 a network of 208 online channels promoting white supremacy ideologies were identified and studied.<sup>55</sup>

### 3.5. Visitors and Contributors

On platforms not specifically dedicated to VRWE, it is difficult to estimate the number of users that communicate VRWE content since VRWE content can come in many different shapes and forms. The number of visitors to different platforms, and from which country they visit, can provide us with some information about potential receivers of VRWE content. However, different solutions for surfing anonymously, such as using a VPN, makes it hard to determine which country the visitors really come from. When it comes to counting visitors of dedicated VRWE platforms, it should be taken into account that there are several reasons, other than ideological affiliation, for visiting a web page. Regular

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<sup>52</sup> <https://mewe.com/terms>

<sup>53</sup> Guhl, J. & Davey, J. (2020) A Safe Space to Hate: White Supremacist Mobilisation on Telegram. ISD briefing.

<sup>54</sup> Clifford, B. & Powell, H. (2019) Encrypted Extremism Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram. Program on Extremism. The George Washington University.

<sup>55</sup> Guhl, J. & Davey, J. (2020) A Safe Space to Hate: White Supremacist Mobilisation on Telegram. ISD briefing.



visitors likely include researchers, analysts, journalists and law enforcement agencies, as well as generally curious individuals.

On all platforms where English is the major communication language, most of the visitors are from the United States. The Daily Stormer has 744K users per month; From the European countries most visitors are from United Kingdom (5.86%), France (3.23%), Sweden (2.84%), Germany (2.63%), and the Netherlands (2.07%).<sup>56</sup> Gates of Vienna attracts 72.5K users per month; From the European countries, most users are from Sweden (11.73%), Denmark (6.31%), Italy (4.46%), United Kingdom (4.01%), and Portugal (1.69%).<sup>57</sup>

The minimal moderation platforms have a larger audience. Gab has 18.3M visitors per month, BitChute 37.07M, Telegram 131.65M, and VK 1.40B visitors per month. 4chan attracts 43.1M users every month, 8kun 1.5M and Endchan 149K visitors per month. The European countries with the most visitors to some of the minimal moderation platforms are listed in Table 1. More details about the visitors can be found in Appendix, Table A2.

Table 1. European countries with most visitors to some of the minimal moderation platforms. The table lists percentage of monthly visitors during April-June according to SimilarWeb.

Gab	BitChute	VK	4chan	8kun	Endchan
United Kingdom (4.79%)	Germany (7.60%)	Ukraine (6.45%)	United Kingdom (5.69%)	United Kingdom (4.70%)	Lithuania (7.66%)
Germany (3.42%)	United Kingdom (6.98%)	Moldova (0.79%)	Germany (5.22%)	Germany (3.05%)	Germany (7.10%)
Finland (1.09%)	Poland (2.20%)	Germany (0.49%)	Sweden (2.9%)	France (1.96%)	Hungary (5.52%)
Netherlands (0.95%)	France (1.94%)	Turkey (0.43%)	France (2.51%)	Polen (1.8%)	Greece (3.07%)
France (0.93%)	Netherlands (1.49%)	Georgia (0.27%)	Finland (2.37%)	Italy (1.58%)	Ukraine (2.5%)
Spain (0.82%)	Sweden (1.36%)	Latvia (0.26%)	Netherlands (2.01%)	Finland (1.58%)	UK (2.07%)

While the Chans are known for granting their users anonymity, they do provide the possibility for users to add a flag to their posts, either a country's flag or for example a pirate flag or a National Socialist flag. Assuming that most people who use a flag of a country do so to announce their nationality, we can gain some information about the origins of 4chan users by counting flags. We have counted the flags of European countries that occurred on 4chan/pol/ between 2016 and 2021. The results are shown in Table 2. The most common European flag is the flag of United Kingdom, almost 7% of the posts on 4chan/pol/ that are marked with a flag have that flag. Almost 3% of the posts with flags are marked with the flag of Germany, around 1% each with the flags of the Netherlands, Sweden, France and Poland.

Table 2. Some of the most common European flags on 4Chan/pol/ and the percentage of posts marked with a flag.

Country	%	Country	%	Country	%
United Kingdom	6.97	Poland	1.01	Spain	0.57
Germany	2.77	Finland	0.93	Romania	0.50
Netherlands	1.19	Italy	0.71	Portugal	0.47
Sweden	1.10	Norway	0.68	Denmark	0.41
France	1.04	Ireland	0.59	Austria	0.39

<sup>56</sup> Information was collected from SimilarWeb and is based on the number of visitors between April and June 2021.

<sup>57</sup> Information was collected from SimilarWeb and is based on the number of visitors between April and June 2021.

A total of 1,240,123 posts (0.6% of the total number of posts with flags) are marked with a National Socialist flag, 348,421 posts (0.17% of the total number of posts with flags) with the White Supremacist flag, 765,350 posts (0.37%) have a fascist flag and 782,426 posts (0.38%) have a Deus Vult- flag.<sup>58</sup> More details about the number of flags can be found in Appendix, in Table A3 and A4.

### 3.6. Links to Mainstream Platforms

To understand the relations between different platforms, we have studied what the different platform links to. Most of the links on the two white supremacy forums Stormfront and VNN Forum are to Wikipedia, YouTube, and Dailymail. The most common links on Gab are to YouTube, Twitter, and Breitbart<sup>59</sup>. On 4chan/pol/ the most common links are to Archived (a webarchive that stores data from 4chan), YouTube, and Twitter. Most links on 8kun/pol/ are to different versions of Archive - a page that stores 'snapshot' of a webpage to assure that the webpage stays online even if the original page disappears.

Table 3 shows how often larger platforms Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are linked to from Stormfront and VNN Forum, and from the minimal moderation platforms 4chan/pol/, 8kun/pnd/ and Gab. Most of the links are to YouTube - which is linked to tens to hundreds of times more often than Facebook. A comprehensive explanation for the significant differences in numbers would require a deeper analysis but it is safe to say that the low prevalence of links to Facebook indicates a lack of interest in the contents of Facebook among the audiences of the platforms we investigated. However, the reason for this disinterest remains an open question at this point.

YouTube is regularly the second-most visited website globally, after Google itself, and this alone is likely a factor in the popularity on the platforms we investigated. Furthermore, video content is more difficult to moderate than text, and VRWE content is more likely to persist, especially when the creators know to bend the rules rather than break them. The difference between YouTube-linking on Stormfront and VNN Forum is notable. As a self-styled news network, VNN Forum maintains a media library section which links to videos of interest to its audience, and many of these videos are (or have been) hosted on YouTube. These links remain in the media library even when YouTube removes the actual videos.

Twitter places itself inbetween Facebook and YouTube, but seems particularly popular among the image boards and Gab. This is likely an effect of Gab mimicking Twitter, meaning that the Gab audience is likely to be familiar with Twitter. More information about links from the different platforms can be found in Appendix, Table A1.

Table 3. Links to mainstream platforms, as percentage of total number of links to other sites.

	Links to Facebook (%)	Links to Twitter (%)	Links to YouTube (%)
4chan/pol/	0.02	6.58	33.44
8kun/pnd/	0.21	4.13	8.27
Gab	0.65	7.38	19.28
Stormfront	0.26	0.3	2.94
VNN Forum	0.22	0.27	25.49

<sup>58</sup> 'Deus Vult' is or 'God will' is a chatchphrase used both online and offline by the far right. See for example Hagen, S. (2018) How the 'Deus Vult' gaming meme turned far-right. TNW News.

<sup>59</sup> Breitbart is a conservative news and opinion website.

# The Online VRWE Scene in Europe

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## 4. The Online VRWE Scene in Europe

### 4.1. VRWE in European Regions

Online VRWE is mainly a transnational scene where communication takes place in English. However, there are also local online VRWE scenes where participants use their local languages. To fully grasp the European perspective on online VRWE, these local scenes should also be taken into account. The national online VRWE landscapes are often built around national organisations, where the national language is favoured. Nationally oriented websites, forums and platforms usually focus on national issues, although they do put such local events and developments into an international or global context when suitable, for example by presenting a perceived local problem as part of a global threat. While the scenes influence each other across national borders via the internet, they maintain distinctive national characters by adapting such ideas into their own narratives. With their lack of a language barrier and their focus on local concerns these scenes have the potential to function as national recruitment gateways into the international scene.

Within the frames of this report, it is impossible to cover all the local online VRWE scenes in Europe, which is why we are only providing a few examples. The Counter Extremism Project (2020) indicate that the transnational scene receives inspiration mainly from the Anglo-Saxon (UK, USA), Germanic (Germany) and Nordic (Finland, Sweden) scenes, narratives and imagery.<sup>60</sup> In this chapter we explore the local online scenes built around the regional movements *Génération Identitaire* and Nordic Resistance Movement. Thus, we cover not only the Germanic and Nordic scenes, but also the Francophone scene. Further, we have chosen to include the Polish scene as an example of VRWE in the Central-Eastern European region. The Polish scene is also interesting from the transnational perspective, due to its connection to the Anglo-Saxon scene through organisations such as British Nationalistic Alliance and Polish Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski (National Rebirth of Poland, NOP).

### 4.2. The French Scene

On 3 March 2021, the French government banned the Lyon-based activist group *Génération Identitaire*. The formal reason for the ban was stated to be that they contravened a French law banning ‘incitement to discriminate against a person or group because of their origin’<sup>61</sup>. Other reasons given in various interviews were that the group had developed into what resembled a private militia that advocates discrimination, hatred and violence against individuals based on their origin, ethnicity or religion.<sup>62</sup> At the time it was banned, it claimed to have some 2 800 members of which 200 to 250 were considered to be very active.<sup>63</sup> After the banning, representatives of *Génération Identitaire* denounced the ruling as a political decision and that the group was contributing to the public debate on immigration and the fight against ‘Islamist terrorism’. On 5 May 2021, France’s highest administrative court approved the government’s ban, stating that the decision was proportionate and that propagated ideas ‘tended to justify or encourage discrimination, hatred or violence towards

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<sup>60</sup> Counter Extremism Project (2020). *Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures*.

<sup>61</sup> Trouillard, S. (February 2, 2021) *France to ban far-right group Generation Identity*, France 24.

<sup>62</sup> A third possible reason that was never stated, was a poll by magazine L'Express on 21 January 2021, in which Marine Le Pen, leader of the right-wing populist Rassemblement National (National Rally), received 48 percent of the votes, compared with 52 percent for Macron in the coming 2022 presidential election race.

<sup>63</sup> AFP, (2021) *Génération identitaire proche de la dissolution*, France Politique, 14 February 2021.

foreigners and the Muslim religion.<sup>64</sup> On 6 May 2021, the group's Twitter account and website had been suspended or blocked.<sup>65</sup>

Ever since the Dreyfus affair in the late 19th century, French domestic politics has seen a constant evolution in how new kinds of nationalism have repeatedly emerged, grown and then split into different factions to later re-emerge in new guises. Today's French identity movement and *Génération Identitaire* is rooted in the ethnic nationalism that emerged around the turn of the twentieth century. This nationalism has been shaped, adapted and developed to survive two world wars and several French colonial conflicts, it has re-emerged time and again with new names, in new forms and with a new contemporary focus.

In the autumn of 1968, a group of French nationalist intellectuals and activists formed a think-tank in the city of Nice, the *Groupement de Recherche et d'Études pour la Civilisation Européenne* (GRECE), i.e. 'Research and Study Group for European Civilization'. Its stated goal was to establish a metapolitical 'idea laboratory' that would influence mainstream right-wing parties and French society at large. The founders were deeply concerned about the liberal socialist ideas that were most clearly expressed in the civil unrest in May 1968, which began with a series of student occupations of several universities in Paris in protest of an old-fashioned education system with its traditional institutions. Soon the protests expanded into protests against society as a whole – capitalism, consumerism and imperialism.

GRECE, soon dubbed the *Nouvelle Droite* (the New Right) by the media, a label they gradually began to use themselves, advised their members not to employ 'outdated language' that might associate the group with fascism – the idea was instead to repackage old fascist ideas in a new form.<sup>66</sup> They were not anti-democratic but rather against liberal, capitalist modernism, equality and Christian ideology. In the 1970s, GRECE began to distribute a magazine called *Éléments* to the general public. The title of one article written in June 1979 can serve as an example of the content: '*C'est la race indo-européenne qui porte l'élan scientifique, culturel, technique, et qui imprime sa marque à l'essor de nos sociétés*' i.e., '*It is the Indo-European race which carries the scientific, cultural and technical impetus, and which leaves its mark on the development of our societies*.'<sup>67</sup>

Since 1986, when nationalist theorist Guillaume Faye left the think-tank to refine the group's ideas into a more aggressive racial and anti-Muslim ideology, the notion of European identity has become central for a number of different groupings that fall under the term *Mouvance Identitaire* (The Identity Movement). *Les Identitaires* (the Identitarians) is one of the larger French organisations associated with the movement and has since its inception in 2003 carried out a series of high-profile demonstrations and actions.

In 2012, the youth branch of the movement appeared for the first time under the name *Génération identitaire*. The *Génération Identitaire* featured in French headlines in 2012, when they occupied the roof of a mosque under construction in the city of Poitiers, using the building to display anti-immigrant banners. At around the same time, the group had uploaded a video online titled 'A declaration of war'. In the film, young people claimed they were the generation that had seen an 'ethnic divide' and a 'bankrupt' experiment in 'living together' that included 'imposed miscegenation'. During later years, the group has performed several media stunts, including blocking the road leading to the 'Calais jungle' migrant camp in 2016. Two years later, they built plastic fences along the French-Italian border in the Alps dressed as police and border officers even hiring helicopters to control the boarder. Three of the activists were later sentenced to six months in prison for pretending to be officials.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Conseil d'État, (2021), *Le Conseil d'État ne suspend pas la dissolution de l'association Génération identitaire*, Twitter, May 5.

<sup>65</sup> InfoMigrants, (2021), *French court confirms ban on anti-migrant group*, 5 May 2021

<sup>66</sup> Bar-On, Tamir (2016). *Where Have All The Fascists Gone?* Routledge Press.

<sup>67</sup> *Éléments* no 30, juin 1979.

<sup>68</sup> Willsher, K. (August 29, 2019) *French court jails far-right activists over anti-immigrant Alps stunt*, The Guardian.

Génération Identitaire is a proponent of the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory (see Chapter 8) that asserts that a 'global elite' is conspiring against the white population of Europe, aiming to replace them with people of non-European origin. Génération Identitaire is also against globalisation, multiculturalism and Islam. Furthermore, they oppose the European Union, instead promoting the establishment of a confederation of regional identities that would eventually replace the various nation states of Europe.<sup>69</sup> According to the French historian and philosopher Pierre-Andre Taguieff, Génération Identitaire belongs to a new kind of far-right with many similar faces. He claims that the ultimate goal for them is to influence mainstream politics as 'post-fascists rather than neo-fascists'.<sup>70</sup>

Their ideas have spread to similar organisations all over and outside of Europe. In most European countries, there are groups adhering to the general ideas behind the Génération Identitaire movement – often with a regional twist to the concept, as in Catalonia, Croatia, Flanders and elsewhere. For example, the perpetrator behind the mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand, claimed to be inspired by them.<sup>71</sup> In the United States, there are also several groups that have absorbed their ideas – this also applies to groups and individuals who belong to the alt-right movement.<sup>72</sup>

### 4.3. The German Scene

Germany has a special position within the VRWE scene: Germany arguably represents the historical origin of right-wing ideology, in reaction to which it has implemented strict legal restrictions on the use of right-wing and fascist symbols and language, for example by making it a crime to deny the Holocaust, and by banning the use of the swastika outside of narrow educational contexts. Moreover, Germany regards any German-language internet site accessible from Germany to fall under this jurisdiction, even when hosted internationally. While actual enforcement against VRWE platforms in countries without similar restrictions (such as the USA) is fraught with legal difficulties and modestly successful, the laws ensure that German-language nationalist platforms generally tread carefully and do not espouse fascist ideology as openly as for example their American or Scandinavian counterparts. Analogously, German nationalists outside the internet are either splintered into small underground groups without much public impact, or when larger they are careful to stay within (and merely stretch) the legal limits of expression. This makes it difficult to clearly identify German platforms as *violent* RWE environments. We will however review a few potential candidates.

The *Identitäre Bewegung* ('Identitarian movement'), the German offshoot of the French Génération Identitaire, began to form around 2012. German-language branches and platforms also exist in Austria and Switzerland. The sites promote a nationalist view and the Great Replacement theory (see Chapter 8), and resist immigration and Islam in particular. The German edition is especially active with around 400 articles at the time of writing. The platforms are not open, and there are no user forums or comments.

*PI-News* ('politically incorrect') is a German nationalist news blog promoting negative views about Islam, immigration and multiculturalism. The site has been active since 2004, accumulating some 40,000 articles. PI-News allows user discussions, often attracting hundreds of comments to its articles. The articles avoid crossing legal limits. On a cursory review, the user comments sometimes show less restraint, but they are still decidedly less open in promoting violence than VRWE platforms in many other countries. It is unclear whether this is due to moderation of posts or the users being more moderate in their expressions.

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<sup>69</sup> Taguieff, P.-A., (2015). *La revanche du nationalisme: Néopopulistes et xénophobes à l'assaut de l'Europe*. Presses Universitaires de France.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Bennhold, K., (2019). "Donation from New Zealand Attack Suspect Puts Spotlight on Europe's Far Right". The New York Times, 27 March 2019.

<sup>72</sup> Feder, J. L.; Buet, P., (2017), "They Wanted To Be A Better Class Of White Nationalists. They Claimed This Man As Their Father", BuzzFeed News, 26 December 2017.

The *Reichsbürger* movement ('citizens of the Reich') is a collective term for a number of not necessarily connected (and sometimes competing) groups and individuals who in some form believe that the German Reich was never correctly dissolved at the end of World War II. Consequently, they do not accept the current German state as a legitimate governing authority. Reichsbürger often combine such views with esotericism, conspiracy theories, and scepticism against conventional medicine and science in general. The movement is today estimated to comprise between 15,000 and 40,000 people. Since 2016, several cases have emerged where people connected to Reichsbürger hoarded large amounts of weapons or sent murder threats. The Reichsbürger have no central web presence; Although sites like *Bewusst.TV* or *BRiD-Dokumente* promote views typical for the movement, they must be regarded as the work of small groups.

In keeping with their penchant for conspiracy theories, the Reichsbürger have picked up on the originally American QAnon conspiracy theories about a secret elite of cannibal paedophiles. During the Covid-19 pandemic the Reichsbürger and QAnon have come together in their scepticism against the pandemic and the legitimacy of the government response. In August 2020, Reichsbürger, members of QAnon and other RWE attempted to storm the German parliament; while they never actually managed to enter the building, images of triumphant Reichsbürger waving old German imperial era flags on the entrance steps garnered much German media attention for the movement. On the web, the German-language QAnon uses Facebook groups as well as Telegram and YouTube. There are also dedicated websites, such as *Qlobal-Change* hosted in Switzerland.

## 4.4. The Polish Scene

No country lost a larger proportion of its people during WW2 than Poland, suffering the German quest for *Lebensraum* as well as the Holocaust. However, the subsequent decades of Soviet control and forced atheism directed the Polish resistance almost exclusively against communism. Polish concepts of national identity, independence, and Catholicism (which in Poland is a strong tradition dating back to medieval times) were amalgamated into a deeply conservative ideal with widespread acceptance among the Poles. Given this background, a number of websites and platforms that promote Polish nationalism and Catholicism, while holding positions against the EU, feminism, immigration, communism, and LGBTIQ-equality, operate openly on the web. While the maintainers of these sites use strongly derogatory language against their opponents, they do not themselves call for violence. However, calls for violence are found among user comments and Twitter replies. Many Polish RWE groups use Facebook and Twitter, whereas VK seems to be less popular.

The ONR (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny* – 'National Radical Camp') is a fascist organization founded in 1993, yet regarding itself as the successor of an earlier organization with the same name from 1934. The modern ONR has an estimated 1,000 members. ONR have conducted antisemitic demonstrations and use symbols and salutes from the Third Reich. Their website features some 900 articles, but no forum or comment system. Their Facebook site has been deactivated at the time of this writing, but their Twitter account remains operational and is followed by 21,100 people.

The MW (*Młodzież Wszechpolska* – 'All-Polish Youth') is a far-right youth organization with a strong emphasis on nationalism and Catholicism. It was formed in 1989 as a revival of an earlier organization with the same name that existed from 1922 to 1934. The MW has approximately 1,000 members, who frequently participate in demonstrations, at times violently. Their website promotes their ideology and activism. Their official Facebook page is liked by 44,817 people, and its Twitter account is followed by 19.1K people.



Marsz Niepodległości - a yearly demonstration held during the Polish Independence Day - has been initiated by MW and ONR. While it has started as a small event of several hundred people deriving from national organizations, it gradually moved into the mainstream gathering up to 250.000 participants in more recent years. The yearly changing 'theme' or 'maxim' included 'Poland for Poles, Poles for Poland', or 'Our civilisation, our rules'. International speakers are invited, for example, members of Italian neo-fascist organization New Force. The Facebook page of Marsz Niepodległości is liked by 258,877 people, and its Twitter account is followed by 24,500 people.

In January 2021, two Polish social media platforms were launched: *Albicla* (referring both to *albus aquila*, Latin for 'white eagle', and the phrase 'Let all be clear') and *Wolni Słowianie* ('Free Slavs'). Both platforms ostensibly aim to be Polish 'free speech' alternatives to Facebook, although in practice members who promote non-RW views get banned. Albicla is operated by the far-right magazine *Gazeta Polska*, and among the platform members are high-ranking government politicians. *Wolni Słowianie* on the other hand was founded by a group of RW survivalists who present themselves in videos wearing masks and paramilitary clothing, and the logo of the platform uses the *stoneczko* ('little sun'), a slavic eight-armed sun symbol with resemblance and historic relation to the swastika.

Overall, the Polish environment results in a perception of RWE that differs from the perceptions in many other European countries. At the time of writing, the general attitudes expressed by media, many mainstream politicians, as well as substantial parts of society, lean toward approval of nationalist views and expressions that elsewhere might be considered extremist. As a result of the general atmosphere, Polish VRWE has less need for closed digital safe-spaces, hiding or dog whistling. At the same time, the Polish far right remains distinctly Polish: The atrocities of the Nazi-occupation are not forgotten, and unlike Western and Nordic VRWE, the Polish far-right is not as likely to adopt Germanic fascist symbolism, instead combining Christian imagery with Polish national symbols.

## 4.5. The Nordic Scene

The Swedish Resistance Movement (*Svenska Motståndsrörelsen*) was founded in 1997. The organization gradually grew during the early 2000s and developed branches in Norway, Denmark and Finland. In 2016, the Swedish Resistance Movement changed its name to the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM)<sup>73</sup>. NRM is currently the largest National Socialist organization in Sweden and Scandinavia's most dominant VRWE group.

The stated goal of the organization is to overthrow the democratic society, replacing it with a united National Socialist leadership state. Their ambition is that the different Scandinavian countries should unite to become a republic, bound together by pan-Nordic National Socialism under the political and ideological control of NMR. Further, the organization claims that the 'white race' is perishing due to immigration to Scandinavia. One goal of NRM is to deport the majority of all non-'ethnic northern Europeans or of closely related peoples' from the Nordic countries.<sup>74</sup> Although NRM have had branches in all Nordic countries, the Finnish branch of NRM was banned by Finnish Supreme Court in 2020,<sup>75</sup> after a three-year long legal battle following the beating to death of a 28-year-old man by members of the group. At the time it was estimated that the Finnish branch had between 70 and 90 members.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> or Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen - NMR in Swedish

<sup>74</sup> Redaktion (2015.) *Vår politik*, September 6, 2015, Nordfront. [Our politics, Nordic Resistance Movement - Nordfront]

<sup>75</sup> Klingberg, L. (2020). Högsta domstolen: Nordiska motståndsrörelsens verksamhet måste upplösas. *Hufvudstadsbladet* 20 September 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Lindhe, J. (November 30, 2017), Nordiska motståndsrörelsen förbjuds i Finland, SVT Nyheter.



NMR is a strictly hierarchical and disciplined organization with a military appearance. In Sweden, it is divided into eight regions, called 'nests'. Within each nest there is a 'battle group' controlled by a group leader. The inspiration for the organizational principles for NMR is derived from the Romanian fascist leader Codreanu and his paramilitary organization 'Iron Guard' in the 1930s. Not only do NMR use the structure, terminology and sectarian elitist doctrine of Iron Guard, they also copy their political colours – green, white and black.<sup>77</sup>

In 2015, under new leadership, NRM managed to recruit several new members. NRM registered a political party and participated in the 2018 general parliamentary elections and in some municipalities in Sweden. The initiative failed - the party received a total of 0.03% of the votes. Due to internal disagreements, the movement was in disarray. The number of activities began to fall sharply, as prominent members of NMR started new groups that competed with NMR - often by being less hierarchical. Due to the pandemic, most actions were cancelled in 2020, which further reduced the movement's visibility and influence.<sup>78</sup>

NRM have their own news site *Nordfront* where they report news from a National Socialist perspective, advertise the organisation's own activities, and also write about topics such as lifestyle and history. A commentary field allows readers to discuss the articles. In addition to being the movement's shop window, Nordfront has also served as a meeting place for NMR's leadership and active members as well as for those who sympathize with the movement's thoughts, ideas and values. A study by the Swedish Defence Research Agency showed that in October 2017, 4 451 different users were participating in discussions on Nordfront.<sup>79</sup> NRM also operates its own podcast channel with a number of different programs and podcasts, for example *Radio Nordfront*, a news site based on the content of Nordfront. NRM in Denmark have their own version of Nordfront and NRM in Norway have a similar site called *Frihetskamp*.

NRM are also present on Gab where they have 3.7K followers (May 2021) and on their official Telegram channel with 3.6K followers. On VK, NRM:s official page is suspended (May 2021) but at the time of writing they still have a presence on VK via their news site Nordfront. Nordfront has two pages on VK: one page for news articles (2725 members) and one page for video (Nordfront TV – 650 members).

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<sup>77</sup> Redaktionen (2014) Denna dag 1938 mördades den nationelle socialisten Corneliu Codreanu, Nordfront, 13 November 2014.

<sup>78</sup> Expo, 2021, Svensk Rasideologisk Miljö – analys, statistik och trender, Stiftelsen Expo, page 14

<sup>79</sup> Kaati, L. (red) (2017) Det vita hatet: radikal nationalism i digitala miljöer.[The white hate: radical nationalism in digital environments] Swedish Defence Research Agency. FOI-R--4463--SE.

# VRWE Communication Style

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## 5. VRWE Communication Style

### 5.1. Language as a Unifying Force

VRWE communities are united not only by ideological content, but also by a certain characteristic regarding how they use language, symbols and other imagery. Online VRWE communities, like any other groups or communities, share certain linguistic and visual identity markers. These identity markers manifest by, for instance, the use of certain symbols in one's profile picture, or using a jargon that differs subtly but characteristically from everyday language. The VRWE identity markers helps others discern who's who when it comes to degree of affiliation with, or commitment to, a certain group or cause. Correct and consequent use of VRWE identity markers signals that the user is part of the scene. It also elevates one's status in the community.<sup>80</sup> The more identity markers there are in a community, the more cohesive the community is.<sup>81</sup> This is why identity markers are useful in propaganda (see Section 5.5), where a positive self-image and a sense of belonging will attract the recipients to a cause or group. Besides similarity of speech patterns, linguistic innovation (making up words, or using words in a new way) has been recognized as a way to help create tight-knit sub-cultures.<sup>82</sup>

The renowned German-Jewish scholar Victor Klemperer described in his 1947 book *Language of the Third Reich*<sup>83</sup> the almost imperceptible processes wherein words shift their meanings or values to reflect an ideological shift, and how these processes work bidirectionally, so that the way one uses language also affects how one thinks. Over time, Klemperer observed that the way the National Socialist sympathisers used language eventually seeped out to wider strata of the German society. The process described in Chapter 3 of VRWE content spreading from ideologically dedicated platforms, such as Stormfront or VNN Forum, to non-dedicated ones, such as Gab, is somewhat reminiscent of the process Klemperer described. In this chapter, we will provide four case studies to exemplify what can be learned by linguistic studies of VRWE communication.

### 5.2. Case Study 1: Dog Whistling

The practice of dog whistling is often used to communicate VRWE content on social media, as a way to bypass censorship algorithms.<sup>84</sup> Dog whistling is a form of communication wherein a message is formulated in innocuous terms to conceal its true meaning from all but a certain subset of the audience.<sup>85</sup> One way to dog whistle is to deliberately misspell words, such as 'knee-grow' or 'joo'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Gonzales, Hancock, J.T., & Pennebaker, J.W. (2009) Language style matching as a predictor of social dynamics in small groups. *Communication Research*, Giles, H., Coupland, J., & Coupland, N. (1991).Accommodation theory: Communication, context, and consequence. In *Studies in Emotion and Social Interaction* (pp. 1–68). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press .

<sup>81</sup> Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, C., Gamon, M., & Dumais, S. (2011). Mark my words!: Linguistic style accommodation in social media. *20th International conference on world wide web*. New York: ACM.

<sup>82</sup> Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil, C. West, R., Jurafsky, D., Leskovec, J., & Potts, C. (2013). No country for old members: User lifecycle and linguistic change in online communities. *Proceedings of the 22nd int.l conference on World Wide Web*, 2013 .

<sup>83</sup> Klemperer, V. (2006). *The language of the Third Reich: LTI-Lingua Tertii Imperii : a philologist's notebook*. London ; New York: Continuum.

<sup>84</sup> Bhat, P., & Klein, O. (2020). Covert hate speech: white nationalists and dog whistle communication on Twitter. In *Twitter, the Public Sphere, and the Chaos of Online Deliberation* (pp. 151-172). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

<sup>85</sup> Saul, J. (2018). Dogwhistles, political manipulation, and philosophy of Language. *New work on speech acts*, 360, 84.

<sup>86</sup> These examples have been found using keyword expansion on the original spellings. See Kaati, L. et al (2019). Digitalt slagfält. En studie av radikalnationalistiska digitala miljöer. FOI-R--4813--SE. Stockholm: FOI.

Several of these deliberate misspellings and other dog whistles have become part of the jargon, and they are used even when not needed to avoid censorship (see the study of triple parentheses in Section 5.4).

White supremacists have been using numerical symbols as dog whistles for several decades. For instance, the number 18 is used to denote Adolf Hitler, who’s initials are the first and eighth letters of the alphabet. Other numbers used to signal affiliation are 4/20,<sup>87</sup> denoting Hitler’s birthday, and 14, denoting the *14 Words* slogan. The slogan ‘*We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children*’, is thus named since it consists of 14 words. The phrase was coined in the 1990s by David Lane, an influential member of white supremacy terrorist group *The Order*, founder of a white nationalist neo-paganist network called *Wotansvolk*, and complicit in the murder of Jewish radio host Alec Berg in 1984. The number 14 is often used in combination with 88 (HH = Heil Hitler) as in 1488 or 14/88.<sup>88</sup>

For case study 1, we have counted all unique users on Gab who used 1488 or 14/88 in their communication. Figure 4 shows the number of these users per month over almost four years. The rapid increase in August 2017 of users who mentioned 1488 or 14/88 coincides with the Unite the Right rally that took place in August 11-12 in Charlottesville, US. During the following months it continued to increase and stayed at its peak until early 2019. During the first quarter of 2020, the number of users mentioning 1488 or 14/88 was still double the number in the year before the Charlottesville rally.

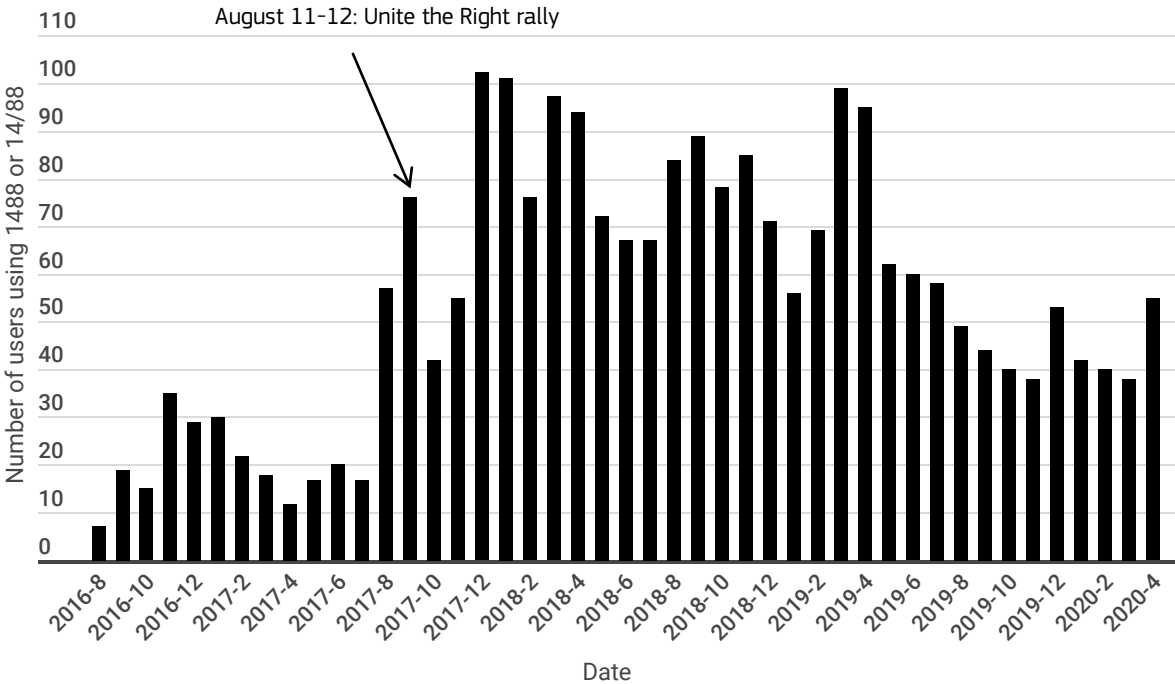


Figure 4. Numbers of monthly Gab-members who used 1488 or 14/88 in their communication.

In 2019 there were a total of 508 unique users who used 1488 or 14/88 in their communication on Gab. A manual inspection showed that the use of numbers often was combined with statements like

<sup>87</sup> However, in most contexts ‘four-twenty’ is used as a reference to cannabis culture.  
<sup>88</sup> Factsheet: David Lane. Bridge Initiative Team. Published 2 Jul 2019. <https://bridge.georgetown.edu/research/factsheet-david-lane/>

'NAT SOC 4 LIFE', 'Heil Hitler', 'Gas the Kikes' and 'Race War Now!' as well as hashtags such as #NationalSocialism, #WhiteGenocide, #14Words, #WPWW<sup>89</sup> and #WhitePride.

The results indicate that the very old and very niche tactic of National Socialist dog whistling by using numbers has not only survived, but spread to a large platform as Gab, where it has also become more popular over time.

### 5.3. Case Study 2: Scare Quotes

Among the linguistic peculiarities that Klemperer<sup>90</sup> noted as intrinsic to National Socialist language is the use of what he called 'ironic quotation'. For instance, Einstein was referred to as a "Forscher" ('researcher'), Roosevelt and Churchill as "Staatsmänner" ('statesmen') (Klemperer 1946, 97).<sup>91</sup> Klemperer noted that this provocative way of using quotation marks came to be far more frequent than regular quotations.<sup>92</sup>

This particular way of using quotation marks (nowadays referred to as scare quotes<sup>93</sup>) came into focus again by the end of 2016, when it was noted that scare quotes in American political discourse had suddenly increased.<sup>94</sup> The practice of scare quotes serves to provide a fundamental destabilization of the quoted object and its meaning.<sup>95</sup> Thus, by studying which words are frequently written within quotation marks, we will learn which concepts are under question. In case study 1, we have extracted all content words that appear within quotation marks on 4chan/pol/, 8kun/pnd/, Endchan/pol/, Gab and Stormfront.

Table 4. Some of the words that most commonly appear within quotation marks.

4chan/pol/	8kun/pnd/	Endchan/pol/	Gab	Stormfront
People	white	nazi/nazis	White	racist/racism
White	jews/jew	white	Racist	holocaust
Hate	america	denazification	Paradise	hate speech
Nazi	good	anti-semitism	Democracy	diversity
racist	people	right wing	researchers/scientists	nazi

The words 'Nazi' and 'racist' commonly occur within quotation marks in three out of five platforms, implying that many users of these platforms consider claims of racism to be exaggerated, and/or oppose the label 'Nazi'. On Stormfront, the word 'holocaust' is often written within quotation marks, a sign of Holocaust denial.

A similar study done by the Swedish Defence Research Agency in 2019<sup>96</sup> showed that some of the most quoted words on Stormfront were 'racist/racism', 'nazis', 'diversity' and 'holocaust', while on Gab they were 'hate speech', 'racist/racism' and 'refugees'. When comparing the 2019 study with the one presented here, it appears that Stormfront is more or less static in this respect, while Gab has changed somewhat in between the two studies. This is expected, given the different orientations of the

<sup>89</sup> WPWW is an abbreviation for White Pride World Wide – using abbreviations and letters is another way to express ideological view.  
<sup>90</sup> Klemperer, V. (2006). *The language of the Third Reich: LTI-Lingua Tertii Imperii : a philologist's notebook*. London ; New York: Continuum.  
<sup>91</sup> Press, S. M. (2005). The language of ideology: Lingual manipulation of readers in German literature of the Third Reich. *Vanderbilt Undergraduate Research Journal*, 1.  
<sup>92</sup> Klemperer, V. (2006). *The language of the Third Reich: LTI-Lingua Tertii Imperii : a philologist's notebook*. London ; New York: Continuum.  
<sup>93</sup> Geach, P. (1957). *Mental acts; their content and their objects*. Humanities Press.  
<sup>94</sup> Sander, E. (2017) Donald Trump and the 'rise' of scare 'quotes'. The Guardian, 14 mars 2017.  
<sup>95</sup> Predelli, S. (2003). Scare quotes and their relation to other semantic issues. *Linguistics and philosophy*, 26(1), 1-28.  
<sup>96</sup> Kaati, L. et al (2019). Digitalt slagfält. En studie av radikalnationalistiska digitala miljöer.[Digital Battlefield. A study of radical nationalist digital environments] FOI-R--4813--SE. Stockholm: FOI.

respective platforms. Gab does not have a clear ideological profile, and its discussions are more susceptible to changes in the surrounding world. Putting ‘democracy’ within quotation marks indicates the view that democracy is desirable but not currently prevailing. As mentioned in Chapter 0, the far-right has disparaging views on democracy, while the extreme right is generally against it.

### 5.4. Case Study 3: Triple Parentheses

Today, many are familiar with the so-called echo, or triple parentheses, meant to signify that someone is Jewish, as in ‘(((They))) own all the (((media)))’. The use of triple parentheses originates in 2014 as an echo sound effect in the American ethnonationalist alt-right podcast the Daily Shoah whenever they mentioned a person or phenomenon they considered ‘Jewish’. This sound effect was later transcribed as triple parentheses on an alt-right blog called The Right Stuff.<sup>97</sup> The triple parentheses, by then still an obscure symbol – a dog whistle– spread to other social media such as Twitter. It has been reported that Jewish journalists have been threatened after having their name appear on Twitter within triple brackets.<sup>98</sup> In 2016, a Google Chrome extension called *Coincidence Detector*<sup>99</sup> was downloaded more than 2,500 times before it was removed after a few months. The plug-in was based on a list of 9,000 names of people and organisations that were purportedly Jewish or Jewish-owned. The Coincidence Detector gained some media attention leading to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) listing the triple bracket as a hate symbol.<sup>100</sup> Since then, the triple bracket has lost its appeal as dog whistle, yet it is still in use, as identity marker, but also as a way to make communication more efficient. If you mean to imply that the government is run by Jews, you do not have to spell it out, but can simply write (((government))) and still be understood.

Table 5. Some of the words that most commonly appear within triple parentheses.

4chan/pol/	8kun/pnd/	Endchan/pol/	Gab	Stormfront
they/them/their	they/them/their	they/them	They	they/them
Tricks	america	media/msm	Christian	media/msm
media/msm	official	people	media/msm	who
journalists	who	porn	Cnn	enemy
vaccine	media/msm	hollywood	Cia	people

For case study 3, we have extracted words that frequently appear within triple brackets on three of ‘the Chans’, Gab and Stormfront. The fact that any word at all is written within triple brackets indicates a belief in antisemitic conspiracy theories (see Section 8.1). Still, by studying which words are used in this manner, we can gain insight into which concepts that in certain contexts are considered to be tied to Jewish people.

The most common triple-bracketed words were *people* and *they/them*. Otherwise references to media/mainstream media were common on all of the five platform, indicating a belief that Jews control the media. The appearance of *vaccine* within triple brackets on 4chan is, of course, a reflection

<sup>97</sup> Magu, R., Joshi, K., & Luo, J. (2017). Detecting the hate code on social media. *Eleventh International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*.

<sup>98</sup> Williams, Z. (2016) (((Echoes))) : beating the far-right, two triple- brackets at a time. *The Guardian*, 12 juni 2016.

<sup>99</sup> The term “Coincidence” comes from the narrative that an unproportionate amount of people in power are Jewish, and that liberals falsely claim this to be a mere coincidence.

<sup>100</sup> Hate on display, Hate symbols database. Anti-Defamation League.

of our time, but also a reminder that old antisemitism tends to adapt to current circumstances. Whether it is the plague, war or financial crises, there will be some adaptation of an old conspiracy theory that will make the Jews responsible.

### 5.5. Case Study 4: Visual VRWE Propaganda

As social media have driven a development toward a more image-based communication culture, there has been a corresponding shift toward the visual in digital VRWE communication as well. In many ways, this development favours the impact of VRWE messages. Images tend to speak to our emotions while bypassing our critical thinking in a way that words rarely do.<sup>101</sup> Due to their emotional immediacy they serve as a powerful means of influence. Strong imagery combined with catchy slogans is an efficient and often used method in marketing as well as in political propaganda.<sup>102</sup> The same applies to digital user-generated propaganda in the form of memes, pictures and symbols.

To understand how images, memes, and symbols are used in VRWE communication, we have analysed images from Telegram channels that distribute user-generated VRWE propaganda. From studying how these channels try to promote their cause we can gain insight into the conflicts they want to draw attention to, how they think the conflicts should be resolved and what they want to achieve. Thematic analyses of propaganda have been used previously to study how the terrorist group IS has presented itself.<sup>103</sup>

For case study 4, we have randomly selected 2,000 images from a total of 18 Telegram channels that we identified as distributors of VRWE content. Using the framework that Haroro Ingram (2016) created for studying IS propaganda,<sup>104</sup> we distinguished between crisis enforcing, solution enforcing and identity enforcing messages. The identity building messages are designed to attract the receiver by creating recognition and reinforcing a positive self-image. Crisis enforcing messages have the purpose of making the receiver feel stressed. Individuals under stress have more difficulty remaining rational and become more inclined to seek fast and absolute solutions. Solution enforcing messages offer the receiver a way out of the crisis.

Most of the images in our study contain identity building messages (59%) with symbols, clothes, and historical references. A total of 32% of the images had messages that describe a solution to a perceived crisis, and 9% of the images contain messages that describe a crisis. The solution is violence, and the message is clear – everyone should prepare for the battle. Many of the examined images contained more than one kind of message. Table 6 shows the result of the classification.

Table 6. Categorisation of VRWE images by identity, crisis, and solution.

Categories and the classification of images	
Identity 43.65% (873 images)	identity + solution: 22.4% (448 images)
Crisis 2.2% (44 images)	crisis + identity: 2.15% (43 images)
Solution: 10.35% (207 images)	solution + crisis: 2.1% (42 images)
Uncertain 12.15% (243 images)	crisis + solution + identity: 5.0% (100 images)

<sup>101</sup> Speckhard, A. (2016). The Hypnotic Power of ISIS Imagery in Recruiting Western Youth. International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism.

<sup>102</sup> Ellul, J. (1965). Propaganda: the formation of men's attitudes. Knopf.

<sup>103</sup> See for example Winter, C. (2015). Documenting the virtual 'caliphate'. Quilliam Foundation, and Zelin, A. (2015). Picture or it didn't happen: A snapshot of the islamic state's official media output. Perspectives on Terror (9).

<sup>104</sup> Ingram, H., (2016) Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda: Meaning, Credibility & Behavioural Change, Vol. 7, No 9. The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism.

The identity enforcing images in the study focus on ethnic identity, on beautiful scenery and white women and children in old fashioned clothing or folk costume living close to nature, interspersed with symbols such as the Swastika or the Sonnenrad<sup>105</sup>, thus recalling the romantic blood-and-soil ideal of National Socialism. Another identity enforcer is history. Many of the images contain references to historical events with folklore, mythology, religious scriptures, ancient statues, and symbolism combined with slogans like 'Worth fighting for' and 'Embrace tradition - reject degeneracy.' Historical narratives are often used in propaganda; creating a connection to the past will make the ongoing cause seem meaningful.<sup>106</sup> Slogans like 'Protect your heritage' and 'Love your own kind' enforces a connection between the receiver and others of the same ethnicity. References to popular culture are also used in identity reinforcing messages since it connects the propaganda with something relatable. In the examined material meme characters such as Pepe the frog and Moon Man/Mac Tonight appeared frequently, as did pictures of manga figures holding copies of Siege (see Chapter 9).

A relatively small percentage of the images were crisis enforcing. The crisis conveyed by the images consists of threats towards the ethnic identity and the nation in the form of Antifa, Jews, non-whites, LGBTQ, interracial relationships, and refugees. Another crisis portrayed is the decay of modern society, with images of how nature is destroyed by pollution or how men become passive and effeminate by watching porn and eating junk food.

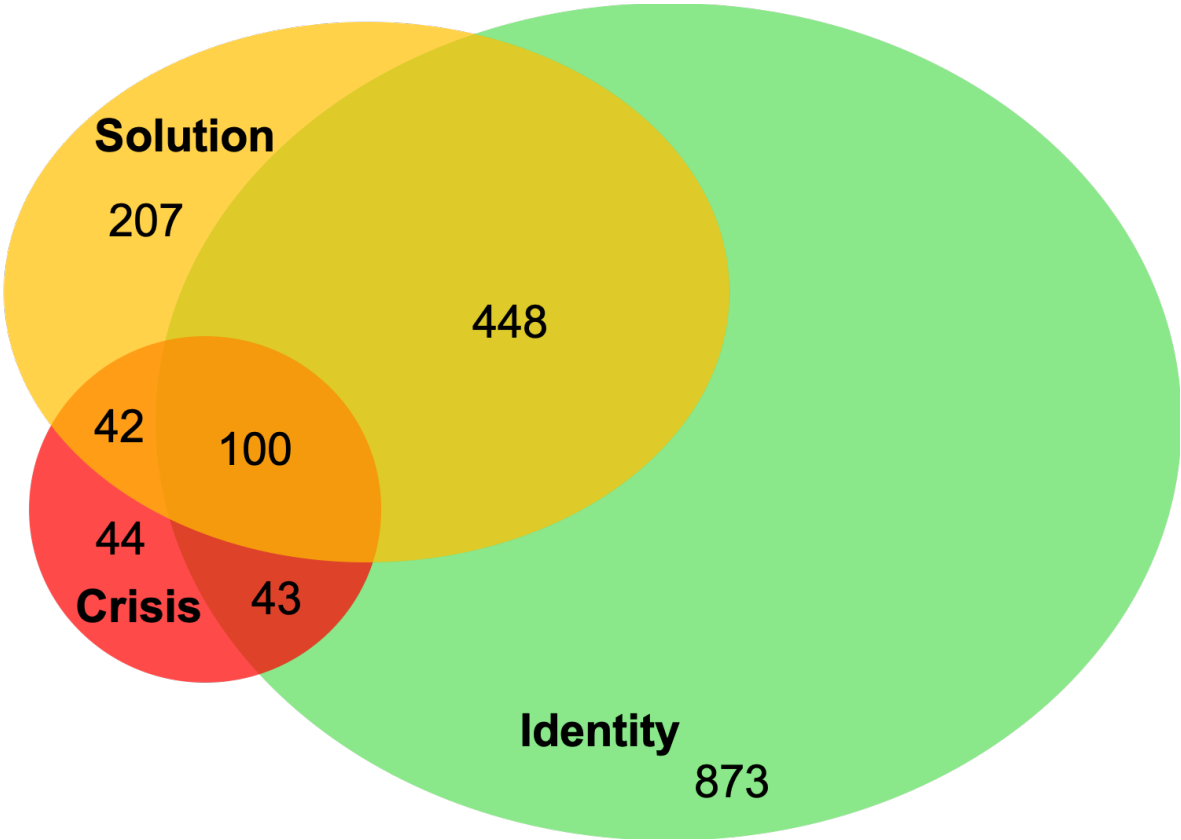


Figure 5. The distribution of the three factors among the images.

<sup>105</sup> The Sonnenrad, also called black sun or sun-wheel, is an ancient symbol consisting of several *sig* ('sun')-runes forming a sun. This symbol was adopted by National Socialists in the 1930s in order to evoke associations to a Norse heritage.

<sup>106</sup> Reed A., Dowling J. (2018). The role of historical narratives in extremist propaganda. Defence Strategic Communications, 4.



The suggested solution is armed battle. Images of armed men are combined with slogans like 'join your local crew' and 'you will be remembered'. Other images show weapons and armed men guarding the forests with slogans such as 'the law of life is to kill or die.' Terrorist attacks are also presented as a solution, with glorified pictures of known violent VRWE offenders like Dylan Roof or Anders Behring Breivik, often referred to as 'heroes' or 'saints'.

To summarize the results of this case study, most propaganda pictures contain identity enforcing messages, sometimes combined with messages of crisis and/or solution. The identity that these pictures convey is closely tied to European history and heritage, mainly ancient Roman culture and National Socialist Germany. Beautiful scenery in the form of coniferous forests, lakes and snow-capped mountains is used to enforce a territorial connection between recipient and nation, while references to popular culture are used to make the ideology relatable. A fairly large percentage of the pictures are solution enforcing (often combined with identity-messages), and among these almost all allude to some combination of violence and weapons.

# Toxic Language

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## 6. Toxic Language

### 6.1. A Toxicity Classifier

Many online VRWE communities use hateful and toxic language when talking about other groups. Although most people have an intuitive sense about what hateful language is, there is no consensus about how it should be defined. We often have different views and levels of tolerance, and even the same person may judge a message differently depending on which context it appears in. Social media companies have their own polices on what kind of content should be banned from their platforms due to being hateful. These polices generally change over time to capture new forms of hate speech. In August 2020, Facebook updated their policy against hateful content to include Jewish conspiracy theories and caricatures of people of African descent in the form of ‘blackface’.<sup>107</sup>

The term ‘hate speech’ is often used to cover different forms of expressions that spread, incite, promote or justify hatred, violence, and discrimination against a person or group of persons. While most definitions of hate speech share some common elements, alternative terminology such as ‘abusive language’, ‘toxic language’, and ‘dangerous speech’ have been introduced to either broaden or to narrow the definition. The term ‘dangerous speech’ is used to describe communication that inspires violence and rhetorical techniques such as dehumanization, protection of an in-group, and threats towards the purity of a group.<sup>108</sup> The reason for using different terminologies is the need to differentiate illegal hate speech from legal expressions of hate or aggression toward certain groups, while still acknowledging that the latter may also be harmful. At the EU level, the Framework Decision on combating certain forms of expressions of racism and xenophobia<sup>109</sup> provides a minimum standard on what is illegal in the Member States, allowing for stricter legislations on a national level. We will use the term *toxic language* to refer to blatantly aggressive and demeaning content, including hate speech.

To get a deeper understanding of the content that is published in various digital environments we have developed an accurate measurement of what we call *toxic language* usage and a categorization of the *targets of toxic language*. This type of analysis is challenging due to the sheer number of texts in these environments. The scale is only manageable with automated methods, which in turn are hampered by several obstacles: Toxic language is highly subjective, and even human experts can disagree in their interpretations of any given text. Furthermore, authors using toxic language are creative in coming up with ever new expressions, both to appear witty and to evade moderation, and computers cannot interpret such less blatant expressions due to their limited understanding of language. Because of such issues, no automated system can detect toxic language as accurately as humans.

Deep learning-based *language models* (see Section 2.3) currently yield the best results: An extensive neural network is first trained on millions of texts (such as Wikipedia, books and news articles) to reach a generic, rudimentary understanding of the connections between words, and with this foundation it is then further tuned to become a toxic language classifier using thousands of curated

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<sup>107</sup> Kastrenakes, J (2020) Facebook bans blackface and anti-Semitic stereotypes in hate speech update. The Verge.

<sup>108</sup> Dangerous Speech Project (2021) Dangerous speech: A practical guide. Available online <https://dangerousspeech.org/guide/>

<sup>109</sup> Framework Decision on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law. Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA of 28 November 2008 on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law.

training samples. We have trained such a classifier based on Google BERT,<sup>110</sup> fine-tuning it with approximately 10,000 training samples that we selected from different existing hate speech and toxic language sample sets to ensure that the classifier has a broad understanding of the phenomenon. In evaluations our classifier achieved an accuracy of 81% relative to human assessments.<sup>111</sup> The mix of training sets helps to keep performance relatively stable across environments, although drastic divergences in posting style can affect accuracy.

The training selection also ensures that the classifier identifies toxic language based on a combination of definitions, which tunes the classifier for sensitivity, making it more likely to overestimate rather than to miss occurrences of hate. This is suitable for our use, because as discussed in Section 2.4, text analysis based on machine learning should not be trusted blindly. Instead, the classifier is part of a two-phased approach, serving as an initial filter that discards the more obviously non-toxic posts, leaving us with a more manageable number of texts that have a higher likelihood of toxicity. In the second phase we manually review the flagged posts, allowing us to remove false positives. Where the classifier uses an implicit amalgamation of toxicity definitions it has learned from its training data, the definition we used during the manual inspection is more stringent: We regard a text as using toxic language if it appears intended to harm or offend its targets, that is, specific groups or individuals. The targets may be direct recipients of the text or its subjects. In the latter case the intention of harm or offence may be indirect, by attempting to provoke similar antipathy towards the targets in the immediate recipients. Toxic language can take the form of openly abusive, disparaging or hateful remarks, or more veiled comments that nevertheless communicate the harmful intent. (E.g. 'I know where X lives, anyone up for a visit?'). However, the former, more obvious, type forms the absolute majority of toxic comments on the investigated platforms, presumably because their moderation practices make it unnecessary for users to mince words.

Using this two-phased approach, we measured the proportion of toxic posts in the following five RWE-frequented forums and platforms: *Gab*, *Stormfront*, *VNN Forum*, *4chan/pol/* and *8kun/pnd/*, covering a period from 2016 to 2020. For comparison purposes we also included the analogous results for *Reddit* and *Twitter*, which are more representative of the 'average internet.' As most of these environments have tens of millions of postings, some even billions, the classifier operated on representative samples sized to ensure a confidence level of at least 99 percent and a margin of error of at most 1 percent. As this still resulted in thousands of toxicity-flagged posts for each forum, the manual review inspected 400 randomly selected flagged posts from each environment, a representative sampling with a confidence level of at least 95 percent and a margin of error of at most 5 percent with respect to the subsets yielded by the classifier. The samples were shuffled, and their origins hidden from the annotators to avoid potential bias from knowing the source forums. The results are shown in Figure 6.

VNN Forum exhibits the highest proportion of toxic language posts, and the image board *8kun/pnd/* is close behind. Both have a substantial lead over *4chan/pol/* and *Stormfront*, both of which have virtually equal levels. The relatively small VNN Forum is infamous as a refuge for posters deemed too extreme in the white supremacist *Stormfront*, and *8kun* has a similar origin with respect to the larger *4chan*. As such this overall situation may not be surprising. *Gab* has a relatively low share of toxic posts, but still several times that of *Reddit* and *Twitter*. Thus, all the RWE-frequented environments have substantially higher proportions of toxic postings than the 'normal' internet.

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<sup>110</sup> Devlin, J., Chang, M.-W., Lee, K., & Toutanova, K. (2018). BERT: Pre-training of Deep Bidirectional Transformers for Language Understanding. *arXiv preprint arXiv:1810.04805*.

<sup>111</sup> Berglind, T., Pelzer, B., & Kaati, L. (2019). Levels of hate in online environments. In F. Spezzano, W. Chen, & X. Xiao (Eds.), *ASONAM '19: International Conference on Advances in Social Networks Analysis and Mining, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, 27-30 Aug, 2019*. ACM.

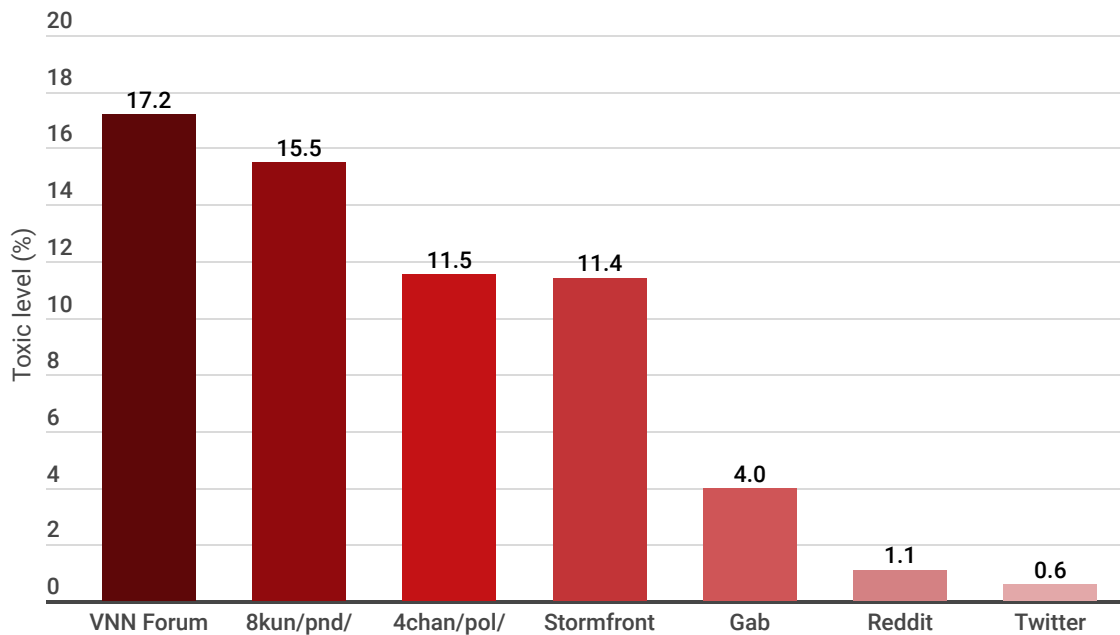


Figure 6. The toxic level in some online forums and platforms.

When comparing the different levels of toxicity it is important to keep in mind the enormous differences in size between the platforms. With on average over 3 million posts in total per month, 4chan/pol/ dwarfs the activity in the others. In absolute numbers its share of toxic posts thus also exceeds the others by at least one order of magnitude, as illustrated in Figure 7.

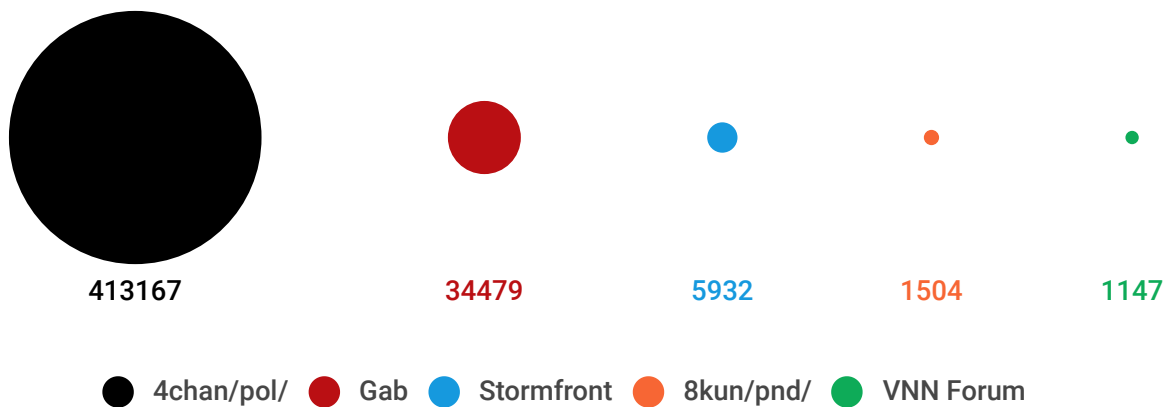


Figure 7. Average number of toxic posts every month on the different platforms

## 6.2. The Targets of Toxic Language

Beyond improving accuracy, the manual inspection also enabled us to characterize the toxicity in more detail, by identifying different categories of toxicity and determining their individual proportions in each RWE-frequented forum. The following categories were used:

- **Jews:** toxic posts about Jews; posts critical of Israeli policies were not included unless clearly motivated by antisemitism.
- **Muslims:** toxic posts about Islam and Muslims, fear of Islam as a rising force;
- **non-whites:** posts disparaging non-white (and sometimes 'less pure' white) ethnicities, and fear of their immigration into 'white' countries;
- **white 'traitors':** white groups who 'betray their race', e.g. by marrying people of colour, by not caring about the 'race war' or voting for the 'wrong' parties;
- **secret enemies:** hate against alleged elites common in conspiracy theories, e.g. the New World Order, 'globalists', 'deep state', or the cabal purported by QAnon;
- **women:** hate against women
- **mainstream society:** toxic comments about (aspects of) society as perceived as mainstream by RWE, such as liberals, feminists, LGBTQ-rights, mass media, politicians;
- **public individuals:** while most toxicity is about groups, this category consists of cases when individuals (e.g. politicians, artists) were singled out as targets because of their individual actions or opinions;
- **forum members:** toxicity against other members of the forum or platform, e.g. direct insults in a heated conversation;
- **other:** toxicity not fitting into any of the categories above, or combinations where no dominating aspect could be identified.

Table 7 summarizes the results, and Figure 8 illustrates the proportions.

*Table 7. Individual toxic language categories per forum, in percentage values.*

	Gab	VNN Forum	4chan/pol/	Stormfront	8kun/pnd/
Jews	6.3	27.9	10.7	19.9	20.9
Muslims	7.9	2.7	4.7	5.3	2.3
Women	4.0	3.5	4.1	0.0	0.9
Secret enemies	4.8	1.3	2.4	2.0	2.3
Mainstream society	26.2	8.0	10.7	11.3	9.1
Non-whites	1.9	28.3	29.0	38.4	26.8
White 'traitors'	2.4	6.2	2.4	6.0	3.2
Forum members	5.6	5.8	16.6	5.3	16.4
Public individuals	13.5	4.9	7.1	4.6	1.4
Other	1.5	11.5	12.4	6.6	16.8

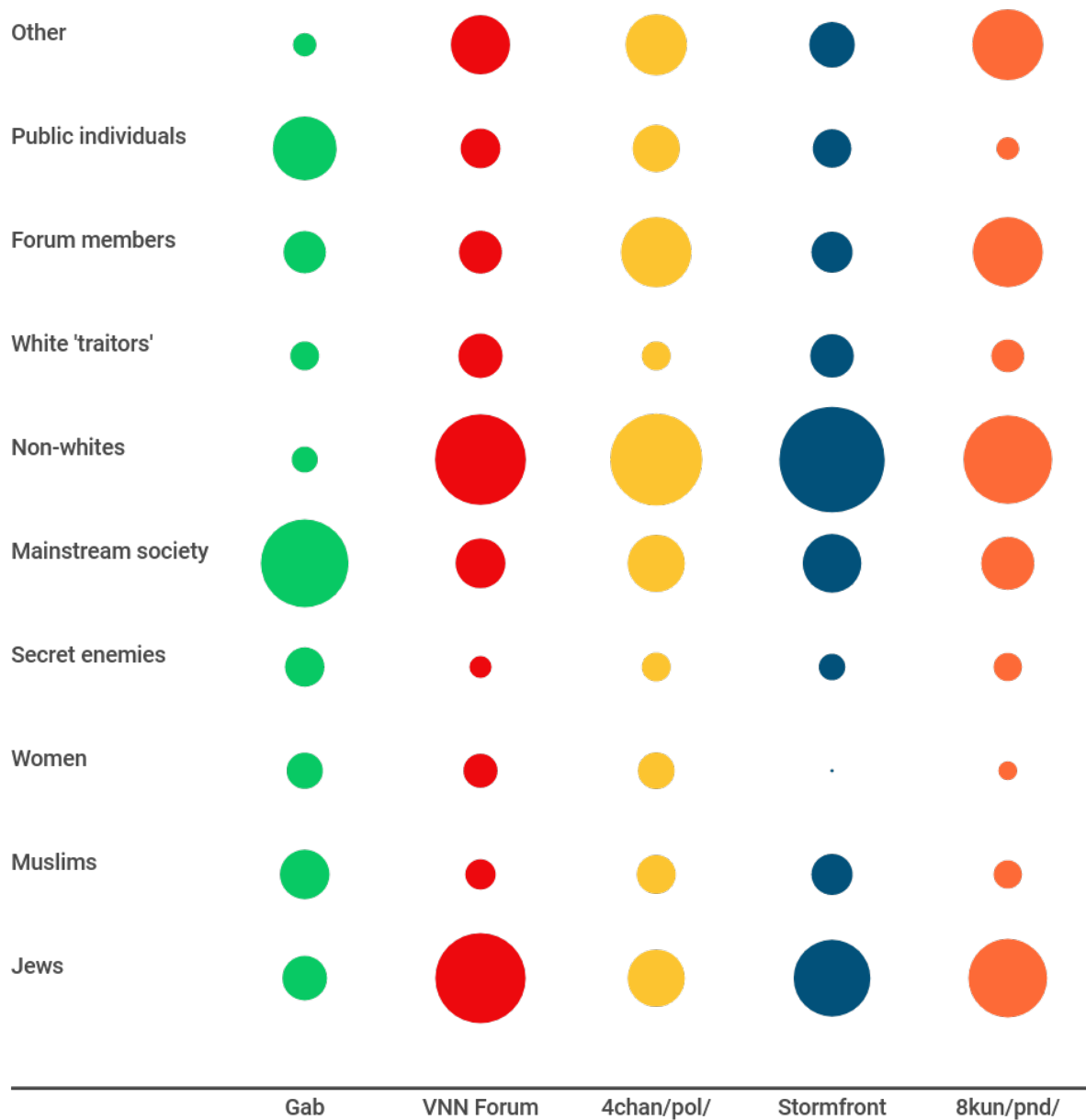


Figure 8. Proportions of toxicity categories; a larger circle indicates a larger share among the toxic comments.

Toxic comments about perceived *non-whites* are the most common form of toxic language overall, and also on each individual platform except Gab. This group includes people with dark skin, Mexicans, Asians, Arabs, people of Pakistani descent, Turks, and different indigenous peoples.

Toxicity against perceived *Jews* is also very common, especially on the VNN Forum. It is notable that 8kun/pnd/ exhibits a higher proportion of antisemitism than the neo-Nazi forum Stormfront, although part of the reason may be the tighter topical focus of 8kun's /pnd/-subforum, whereas Stormfront also includes areas for hobby discussions and even dating. On the other hand, 4chan/pol/ is thematically similar to 8kun/pnd/ yet has just over half the proportion of antisemitism. However, as mentioned in the previous section one needs to keep in mind the differences in scale: In absolute numbers 4chan/pol/ produces more antisemitic posts per day than Stormfront does in a month.

Toxic language directed at the perceived *mainstream society* is the dominating subject of toxic language on Gab, whereas this category is relatively evenly distributed among the other four platforms. Gab has a strikingly unique profile regarding the three categories discussed so far, and it is not clear whether this corresponds to actual differences in audience views, or whether the moderation policies on Gab make its members more likely to encode antisemitic and racist views into social criticism.

Toxic infighting between members is most common on the image boards 4chan and 8kun, approximately three times higher than in the other three environments. This may indicate that the image boards have an ideologically less homogeneous audience, which is plausible given their apolitical origins with a focus on pop culture and memes. Another explanation is the complete anonymity: Most participants on 4chan and 8kun have no persistent usernames. This may lower inhibitions to engage in harsh arguments, as it is hard to maintain grudges when members do not recognize each other from day to day.

Most toxic comments are directed against groups, and some posts about named individuals are based only on the group they belong to, such as posts disparaging former US-president Obama for being black. For our category of *public individuals* we only counted toxic comments referring to actual individual traits of the target, like their actions or opinions. This type is clearly most common on Gab, where it may coincide with the high prevalence of hate against mainstream society, a society exemplified by politicians, journalists, artists etc. Gab also mimics Twitter, a place where many public individuals broadcast their opinions, and it is plausible that Gab-users also follow Twitter – indeed, 4.2 percent of Gab postings contains links to Tweets.

Toxicity about perceived *Muslims* is relatively rare, especially when compared to antisemitism. While toxic comments about ethnicities with large Muslim majorities are frequent, this is usually expressed in a racially motivated way without reference to the religion and thus categorized as toxicity about non-whites. Opinions on the religion are divided in the forums: There is fear of Islam as a growing, foreign threat, but also an admiration for firm Muslim convictions, and instances of Muslim antisemitism are lauded as clear-sighted.

White groups being singled out as *white 'traitors'* is also relatively rare. Stormfront and VNN Forum have the highest proportion of this category, likely related to their ongoing narrative of a 'race war', leading to white groups being judged whether they are on the 'right' side or not. Toxic comments about groups that happen to have a white majority (e.g. Western politicians or journalists) are categorized as hate against mainstream society unless a racial motivation was made explicit.

Toxicity about women is among the most rarely expressed forms of toxic language in the analysed environments. This must be put into perspective, though: As with all categories we only counted posts meeting our strict definition of toxic language which requires an intent of harm. Lesser expressions of contempt are considerably more common. There are also many instances of hate against women of non-white ethnicities, ostensibly motivated by racial prejudice, which we categorized as toxicity against non-whites. When directed against feminism it was usually categorized as toxicity against mainstream society, as the focus of such toxic language tended to be on legal issues and feminist organizations, including male feminists – it may very well have been motivated by underlying misogyny, but it was not expressed as such. The image boards 4chan and 8kun also host other subsections that are more likely to attract misogynistic posts, such as 4chan's extensive adult section with pervasive pornographic content, and which may divert such discussions away from the analysed subforums /pol/ and /pnd/.

Toxic language about secret elites and other alleged shadowy subjects of conspiracy theories is (perhaps surprisingly) rare overall in comparison to the other categories. Belief in such theories is by no means universal, and opinions vary accordingly. They are also subject to trends and flare-ups. See Chapter 8 for a detailed discussion.



The category *other* covers any other types of toxic expressions that are individually too insignificant to warrant their own category. This includes for example hate against RWE, or against combinations that are hard to put into any category above, or toxic language entirely without ideological motivations (e.g. hating some product due to bad experiences).

### 6.3. Levels of Toxic Language Over Time

The level of toxic language seems to be quite consistent over time. Figure 9 shows the levels of toxic language on the platforms 4chan/pol/, Gab, Stormfront and VNN Forum between September 2016 and January 2021 (May 2020 for Gab). VNN Forum is the forum where the level varies most: between 13 and 20 percent. Stormfront, 4chan/pol/ and Gab are more constant with only little variation in percentage.

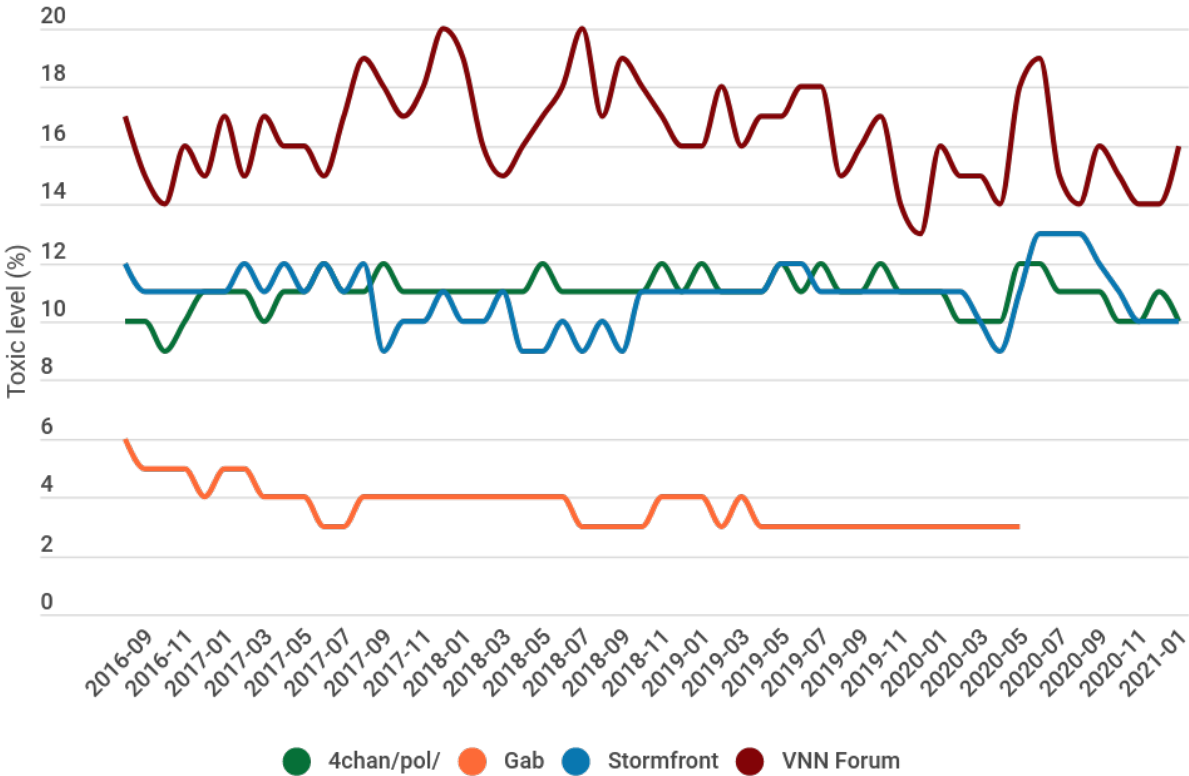


Figure 9. Toxic language levels over time.

# Dehumanization

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# 7. Dehumanization

## 7.1. Creating an Enemy Image

The division between 'us' and 'them' is a fundamental part of any extremist ideology. The construction of a negative, static and threatening enemy image is a necessary step towards ideological violence. Enemy images are constructed by dispositional attributions, i.e., the notion that important features of a group or person are inherent, essential and static rather than temporary and situational.<sup>112</sup> In this process the perceived enemy, whether a group or a person, is assigned certain attributes that make them seem threatening and malicious.

When a group or person is perceived as threatening and malicious enough, violent action might be regarded a necessity. Which groups that are perceived as enemies of radical nationalist groups vary. Some see a Muslim population as the biggest enemy, while other see non-white people as enemies. Yet others prefer to direct their animosity against 'the ruling classes' of politicians, journalists and the like, people that they hold responsible for the perceived decay of society.<sup>113</sup> Some groups are blatantly antisemitic, while others pursue a tacit low-intensity antisemitism, and yet others see Jews as their allies. It is not uncommon that several groups are regarded as enemies. The construction of an enemy image that morally justifies violence is to some extent fuelled by *dehumanization*, i.e., denying that a person or group possesses all the traits that make them human.<sup>114</sup>

Dehumanization can manifest in language, pictures, attitudes or behaviour. There are also different kinds of dehumanization: People can be reduced to some abstract emotionless quantity, such as in the Third Reich when deported Jews were referred to as 'transit material'. This is also seen in the modern-day practice of calling civilian victims of war 'collateral damage'. Another kind of dehumanization (also called infra-humanization) is when people are referred to as slightly less human (e.g., 'brutes', 'savages'). A third kind of dehumanization is when people are likened to something emotionless but harmful such as for instance vermin, malignant tumours or dirt. This kind of dehumanization has been proven to elicit feelings of disgust, contempt and/or anger.<sup>115</sup>

## 7.2. Dehumanization and Violence

During the decades following the second world war, intense social psychological research was fuelled by the urge to comprehend the political and interpersonal mechanisms behind the Holocaust.<sup>116</sup> This is when the notion of dehumanization as one of the precursors of Genocide emerged. The massive National Socialist propaganda campaign picturing Jews as all kinds of species from poisonous mushrooms to rats to demons was thought to have unravelled the moral boundaries. A few decades earlier, the genocide of the Armenians during and after the First World War, was justified by prominent

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<sup>112</sup> Fischer, A. H., & Roseman, I. J. (2007). Beat them or ban them: the characteristics and social functions of anger and contempt. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 93(1), 103; Hutcherson, C. A., & Gross, J. J. (2011). The moral emotions: A social-functional account of anger, disgust, and contempt. *Jou. of personality and social psy.* 100(4), 719.

<sup>113</sup> Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and opposition*, 39(4), 541- 563 ; Mudde, C., & Kaltwasser, C. R. (2017). *Populism: A very short introduction*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>114</sup> Haslam, N. (2006) Dehumanization: An integrative review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10, 252-264.

<sup>115</sup> Kteily, N., Bruneau, E., Waytz, A., & Cotterill, S. (2015) The ascent of man: Theoretical and empirical evidence for blatant dehumanization. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 65, 399-423.

<sup>116</sup> De Vos, J. (2010) From Milgram to Zimbardo: The double birth of postwar psychology/psychologization. *History of the Human Sciences*, 23, 156-175.

physicians describing Armenians as ‘malignancies’ and ‘dangerous microbes’.<sup>117</sup> As stated in the *Ten stages of genocide model*, most historical cases of persecution and genocide have been preceded by dehumanization campaigns.<sup>118</sup>

Although science has failed to corroborate the existence of a causal connection between dehumanization and genocide, depicting an enemy as less than human is an often-used propaganda strategy designed to break down the moral reluctance to cruelty. The dehumanized fall outside the scope of our interpersonal moral code, thus becoming fair game.<sup>119</sup> Dehumanization has also been used as post facto justification of violent actions.<sup>120</sup>

Contemporary research on the effect of dehumanization campaigns shows that people who consume dehumanising propaganda develop more hostile sentiments toward the dehumanized group.<sup>121</sup> On a neurological level, dehumanization activates aversion and deactivates empathy.<sup>122</sup> On an emotional level, dehumanization activates disgust or contempt.<sup>123</sup> On a behavioural level, dehumanization activates antisocial behaviour and deactivates helping behaviour toward those who have been dehumanized.<sup>124 125</sup>

Dehumanization seems to apply almost surgical precision in removing empathy toward the dehumanized group, while empathy toward other groups of people stays more or less unscathed. By reformulating one’s perception of the other as a human being, one also reformulates one’s emotional response as well as the boundaries of what is morally permissible.

### 7.3. Dehumanization in Digital Media

Since dehumanization seems to have the effect of eliciting disgust and hierarchical thinking that by extension legitimizes discrimination and violence, the degree of dehumanizing language in a community may serve as a mirror of the degree of hierarchical inter-group thinking and possible legitimization of violence within the community. We have measured the degree of dehumanizing language on Stormfront, Gab, 4chan/pol/ and 8kun. Reddit was used as a control group, where a low degree of dehumanisation was expected. In this context, dehumanizing language was operationalized as words or phrases denoting a human being in terms of something non-human, and that the referred non-human entity is chosen to elicit culturally or biologically conditioned moral emotions.

A word count and semantic expansion approach was utilized for the study. Commonly used dehumanizing words, such as ‘vermin’, ‘ape’, ‘savage’, ‘weasel’ and ‘rat’ were used as starter keywords that were expanded in a semantic space (see Section 2.3). The expanded word list was reviewed by a team of three experts who screened out all words that were not considered unequivocally

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<sup>117</sup> Savage, R. (2007). “Disease incarnate”: biopolitical discourse and genocidal dehumanisation in the age of modernity. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 20(3), 404-440.

<sup>118</sup> Stanton, G. (2013). The ten stages of genocide. *Genocide Watch*. First presented as eight stages of genocide in 1996.

<sup>119</sup> Maiese, M. (2003). Dehumanization: Beyond intractability. *G. Burgess & H. Burgess (Eds), Conflict research consortium*.

<sup>120</sup> Haslam, N., & Loughnan, S. (2014). Dehumanization and inhumanization. *Annual review of psychology*, 65, 399-423.

<sup>121</sup> Kteily, N., Bruneau, E., Waytz, A., & Cotterill, S. (2015) The ascent of man: Theoretical and empirical evidence for blatant dehumanization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 109, 901-931; Smith, D. L. (2011) . *Less than human: Why we demean, enslave, and exterminate others*. St. Martin’s Press.

<sup>122</sup> Harris, L. T., & Fiske, S. T. (2006). Dehumanizing the lowest of the low: Neuroimaging responses to extreme out-groups. *Psychological science*, 17 (10).

<sup>123</sup> Bar-Tal, D. (1989). Delegitimation: The extreme case of stereotyping and prejudice. In *Stereotyping and prejudice* pp. (169-182). Springer, New York, NY; Haslam, N. (2006) Dehumanization: An integrative review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10, 252-264.

<sup>124</sup> Haslam, N., & Loughnan, S. (2014). Dehumanization and inhumanization. *Annual review of psychology*, 65, 399-423.

<sup>125</sup> Bandura, A., Underwood, B., & Fromson, M. E. (1975). Disinhibition of aggression through diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization of victims. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 9, 253-269.

dehumanizing. The resulting list of 63 word stems plus inflections and common misspellings was used to measure the frequency of dehumanizing language.

Table 8. Examples of dehumanizing words.

Dehumanizing words		
Subhuman	parasite	mudslime
Bloodsucker	pests	ape
Dirtbags	vermin	baboon
Bluegum	cockroach	demon

To adjust for the different sizes of the platforms, the results were normalized.<sup>126</sup> The results are shown in Figure 10. Dehumanizing language was the most frequent on 4chan/pol/, followed by 8kun/pnd/. Of the five platforms, Gab had the smallest frequency of dehumanizing language, yet it had almost double the share of what Reddit had.

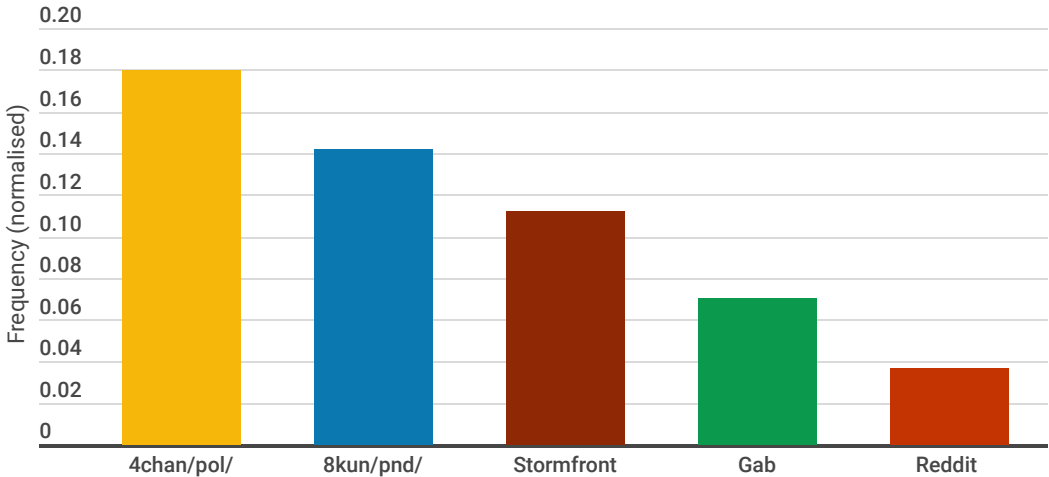


Figure 10. The use of dehumanizing words on the different platforms.

### 7.4. Dehumanized Groups Today

After having measured the frequency of dehumanizing language, we examined which groups are subject to dehumanization on the different platforms. This was done by expanding the list of dehumanizing words in semantic spaces trained for each of the separate platforms. The appearance of certain groups in the expansion was taken as an indication that these groups were frequently mentioned in dehumanizing terms. The results are presented in Table 9.

The platforms that had the highest level of dehumanizing language, 4chan/pol/ and 8kun, also dehumanized the most groups. Particularly, these two platforms were the only ones that dehumanized lower-class people like drug addicts or the poor. Also, they were the only ones that dehumanized men not living up to an ideal of masculinity, so called ‘soy boys’ or ‘cucks’. The

<sup>126</sup> The number of occurrences of dehumanizing words were divided with the number of words for each platform. The result was multiplied with 100.

dehumanization of men on the Chan forums is reminiscent of Incel culture, where very conservative and rigid standards for masculinity has been observed.<sup>127</sup> Though not RWE, the Incel culture contains some very aggressive elements that on occasion have given rise to deadly violence

Table 9. Groups mentioned with dehumanizing terms.

	Stormfront	Gab	4chan/pol/	8kun/pnd/
LGBTQ people		X	X	X
Muslims	X	X		X
Jews	X	X	X	X
Women		X		X
Political opponents*	X	X		X
Men **			X	X
Middle Eastern immigrants	X		X	
Lower-class people			X	X
Dark-skinned people	X	X	X	X
People in interracial relationships	X		X	

\*Groups counted as political opponents varied between the different platforms. Gab: libtards, commies, cultural Marxists. 8kun: antifa, feminists, leftards, leftists, kike lovers. Stormfront: Jewtools, Zionist shills.

\*\* Only words denoting men who fail to live up to some ideal of masculinity were mentioned, e.g. cucks, beta, soy boy.

Since this study does not take into account how much the different groups are dehumanized, we can only assume that the gap between the Chans and Stormfront is at least partly made up of dehumanization of non-ethnic and non-political groups. Stormfront's clear ideological profile restrains dehumanization to Jews, Muslims and 'non-whites'. On Gab and the 8kun, the dehumanized political groups were consistently liberal or left-wing, despite neither platform having a pronounced political orientation.

<sup>127</sup> Fernqvist, J., Peltzer, B., Kaati, L., Cohen, K. & Akrami, N. (2020). *Hope, cope & rope: Incels i digitala miljöer*. [Hope, cope & rope: Incels in digital environments]. FOI memo 7040.

# VRWE and Conspiracy Theories

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## 8. VRWE and Conspiracy Theories

The theoretical underpinnings of violent extremist ideologies often seem to include an explanation of important events in terms of some secret plot staged by a constellation of powerful and malevolent actors, i.e., a conspiracy theory.<sup>128</sup> For instance, as Bartlett and Miller point out in their 2010 review, extracts from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* are included in the Hamas charter, the Aryan Nations believe that a 'liberal-Marxist-homosexual- Zionist coalition covertly censors and disrupts the activities of the Aryan peoples'.<sup>129</sup> Upon examination of manifestos, blog posts or social media messages written by VRWE lone actors, it becomes apparent that certain conspiracy theories are central to their ideologies. For instance, the shootings in Pittsburgh, Christchurch, Poway, El Paso, Oslo, and Halle in 2018 and 2019 were all perpetrated by VRWE activists who to some degree reference conspiracy thinking in their writings or statements.<sup>130</sup>

Although often considered a mainly American phenomenon,<sup>131</sup> studies suggest that levels of conspiracy thinking are just as prevalent in Europe as in the USA. Some studies suggest that conspiracy thinking is more common among people who position themselves to the political right, and also among those who feel distrust toward the political system.<sup>132</sup> Given these findings, it is not surprising that conspiracy theories are an important part of the VRWE narrative. Conspiracy theories often go hand in hand with a general mistrust of the political establishment.<sup>133</sup> There are studies that show that people who believe in conspiracy theories are more likely to act 'outside the democratic norm', and less likely to partake in voting or authorized strikes.<sup>134</sup> Another study links belief in conspiracies to increased support of violent political action.<sup>135</sup> Herein lies the dangerous potential of conspiracy theories: For many people, political extremism and violence become justified by the notion that powerful actors are deliberately causing harm to the people, and that change by democratic means is impossible.<sup>136</sup>

Psychologically, the appeal of conspiracy theories lies in their potential to fulfil epistemic, existential and social needs<sup>137</sup> by providing a more or less coherent narrative that may serve to render some order to a seemingly chaotic world, while simultaneously providing a positive self-image and a sense of belonging to a social group (being part of the group that sees through 'the system').<sup>138</sup> It is in the nature of conspiracy theories to deny the existence of chance or coincidence and neglect the complexities of important events, thus making events more easily labelled and categorized. In that way they can serve as an attempt to relieve anxiety by providing simple explanations for complicated facts.

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<sup>128</sup> Bartlett, J., & Miller, C. (2010). *The power of unreason: Conspiracy theories, extremism and counter-terrorism*. London: Demos.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. (2010).

<sup>130</sup> Counter Extremism Project (2020). *Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures*.

<sup>131</sup> Counter Extremism Project (2020). *Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures*.

<sup>132</sup> Drochon, H. (2018). Who believes in conspiracy theories in Great Britain and Europe. *Conspiracy theories and the people who believe them*, 337-346. Walter, A. S., & Drochon, H. (2020). Conspiracy Thinking in Europe and America: A Comparative Study. *Political Studies*.

<sup>133</sup> van Prooijen, J. W., & Van Lange, P. A. (2014). *Power, politics, and paranoia: Why European people are suspicious of their leaders*. Cambridge University Press; van Prooijen, J. W., & Douglas, K. M. (2018). Belief in conspiracy theories: Basic principles of an emerging research domain. *Journal of social psychology*, 48

<sup>134</sup> Bartlett, J., & Miller, C. (2010). *The power of unreason: Conspiracy theories, extremism and counter-terrorism*. London: Demos.

<sup>135</sup> Imhoff, R., Dieterle, L., & Lamberty, P. (2021). Resolving the puzzle of conspiracy worldview and political activism: Belief in secret plots decreases normative but increases nonnormative political engagement. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 12(1), 71-79.

<sup>136</sup> Bartlett, J., & Miller, C. (2010). *The power of unreason: Conspiracy theories, extremism and counter-terrorism*. London, UK: Demos.

<sup>137</sup> Douglas, K. M., Sutton, R. M., & Cichocka, A. (2017). The psychology of conspiracy theories. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 26, 538-542.

<sup>138</sup> Imhoff, R., & Lamberty, P. K. (2017). Too special to be duped: Need for uniqueness motivates conspiracy beliefs. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 47, 724-734.



Given the rapid changes and the abundance of contradicting information that characterize the modern political landscape, a conspiracy theory may create some sense of continuity and order, while also providing a satisfactory explanation for one's own position in society. For individuals who feel threatened by immigration and multiculturalism and the renegotiation of their own status in society, packaging the threat into a conspiracy theory can make it seem more manageable. The nationalist worries of being enslaved or replaced by non-whites are reflected in different conspiracy theories. In this section we examine the prevalence of four conspiracy theories that have been influential on the VRWE scene. In fact, it might be more suitable to regard these as clusters of conspiracy theories, since there are several different variations on the same themes, as described below, and not all who believe in one variation believe in all of them. Also, several conspiracy theories are often intertwined into a cohesive narrative.

## 8.1. A Threat to the Nation-States

In the otherwise scattered and diverse universe of conspiracy theories, there is one narrative that seems to be more widely accepted than others; namely the one about an authoritarian global state run by a secret elite. Although conspiracy theories about secret societies governing political events have been around at least since the French revolution, the specific idea of a one-world government was first spread in 1950's USA, during the second Red Scare. Old conspiracy theories about a network of international secret societies were combined with the fear of a communist overtake, a combination that gave rise to a narrative wherein a network of Freemasons, Rosicrucians, Illuminati and Jews are trying to overthrow the sovereignty of nation-states, thus creating a communist global state, a *New World Order*.

New World Order (NWO) theories were disseminated in the USA by far-right advocacy groups such as the John Birch society, claiming that the global elite exercise their power by means of front organizations such as NATO, UN or the WHO. This conspiracy theory has been used by American and European nationalist groups as an argument against foreign aid, international cooperation, immigration and multiculturalism, all of which are regarded as steps toward the one-world globalist government. The reason for this particular conspiracy theory's resiliency is the fact that it is virtually unfalsifiable. Since NWO is invisible and always acting in disguise, every event that can be attributed to another actor or circumstance can still be explained as ultimately being the work of NWO actors. Its genericity also makes it applicable to any set of events, as for instance the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 8.2. Governed by Jews

More often than not, the perceived threat against the existence of the nation-state is considered to emanate from a specifically Jewish conspiracy. Antisemitic conspiracy theories have been intermittently prevalent in European culture for several hundred years. For instance, the European plague pandemic in 1348 was considered to be a result of Jews having conspired with the Devil against Christianity. Violent persecution and pogroms against Jewish communities followed. Since the late 1800's, a nationalistic strand of antisemitism has given rise to several conspiracy theories centred around Jewish plots. The Jews were placed under suspicion of not being loyal to the nation they lived in.<sup>139</sup> Such suspicions were presented as truths in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fraudulent document describing how a cabal of Jews conspire for world domination and manipulate

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<sup>139</sup> Wodak, R. (2018). The radical right and antisemitism. *The Oxford handbook of the radical right*, 61-85.

public opinion through their control over media.<sup>140</sup> First published in 1903 in Russia, the document is still available in many countries throughout Europe, North America and the Middle East, although nowadays mainly spread on the internet.<sup>141</sup>

The 1970's saw the birth of a particularly persistent term: ZOG, the 'Zionist Occupation Government'. The term was used by American white supremacists who maintained that the US government was merely a front-organization for a Jewish cabal. The ZOG conspiracy theory has since expanded to encompass Europe as well, and its contents has been accordingly adapted to a pan-Euro-American/Christian perspective. Its most common version states that ZOG secretly governs international finances as well as the governments of several of the world's nation states. The term is now so well known that proponents of VRWE ideologies commonly use the term ZOG whenever they aim to imply that an institution, a company or a person is Jewish or 'Jew-friendly'.

### 8.3. A Threat to 'Whiteness'

In 1988, white nationalist and terrorist David Lane publicized *The White Genocide Manifesto* wherein he unfolded his ideas about a 'Zionist conspiracy' methodically carrying out a plan to exterminate the 'white race' by promoting miscegenation, abortion and homosexuality. Lane's manifesto became influential in spreading White Genocide conspiracy theories to wider strata of right-wing extremists. Over time, the fear of white extinction remains, although the focus has somewhat shifted from miscegenation, abortion and homosexuality to immigration, multiculturalism and falling 'white' birth-rates. Lately, narratives of white extinction have also appeared among eco-fascists, who, by means of Social Darwinist reasoning and appeal to Blood-and-Soil ideology, argue for the importance of balancing birth rates and keeping groups of humans in 'their own habitats'.<sup>142</sup>

On the start page of The Daily Stormer (see Section 3.2), a 'demographic countdown' is presented, claiming to show how the 'white' population in the United States is declining while the 'non-white' population is increasing.<sup>143</sup>

### 8.4. Replaced by Muslims

A variation on the White Genocide theme is the theory about European culture deliberately being destroyed by Muslim immigration. In 2005, British author Bat Ye'or (pen name for Giselle Littman) published a book called *Eurabia*, wherein she argues that, as a consequence of a collaboration between the European Union and Arab governments, Europe is about to become part of a worldwide caliphate. Similar ideas about a deliberate 'Islamification' of the west were shared by the growing counter-jihad movement, tragically culminating in the mass shooting at the Worker's Youth League summer camp in Norway 2011.

Another terrorist attack motivated by a fear of 'Islamification' was the mosque shooting in New Zealand 2019. Before the attack the shooter wrote in a manifesto that 'white' populations were

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<sup>140</sup> Volpato, C., & Durante, F. (2009). Empowering the "Jewish threat": The protocols of the elders of Zion. *Journal of US-China Public Administration*, 6(1), 23-36.

<sup>141</sup> Lipstadt, D. (2012). The Protocols of the Elders of Zion on the Contemporary American Scene: Historical Artifact or Current Threat? In Landes R. & Katz S. (Eds.), *The Paranoid Apocalypse: A Hundred-Year Retrospective on The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (pp. 172-185). NYU Press.

<sup>142</sup> Moses, A. D. (2019). "White Genocide" and the Ethics of Public Analysis. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 21(2), 201-213.

<sup>143</sup> Kaati, L. et al (2019). Digitalt slagfält. En studie av radikalnationalistiska digitala miljöer. FOI-R--4813--SE. Stockholm: FOI.

about to become replaced by Muslim populations.<sup>144</sup> He named his manifesto *The Great Replacement*, presumably alluding to the 2011 book *Le Grand Remplacement*, written by French author and far-right politician Renaud Camus. Camus stated that French culture as well as the French as a people were about to be replaced by non-European, specifically Muslim, immigrants, and also that this alleged replacement was orchestrated by a secret ‘global elite’. The Muslim replacement conspiracy theories are structurally very similar to white genocide conspiracy theories, only packaged differently, without antisemitism and racialism.

### 8.5. Four Conspiracy Theories on 4chan/pol/

We have studied the changing prevalence over time (July 2016 to January 2021) of four conspiracy theories that contain anti-immigrant, antisemitic or anti-Muslim themes on 4chan/pol/. These four conspiracy theories were studied since, besides being important parts of VRWE narratives, they have all been used to motivate VRWE violence (see Sections 7.2 and 7.3). The dataset consisted of texts posted on 4chan/pol/ from 1 July 2016 to 31 January 2021. The reason for choosing 4chan/pol/ is that the dataset is very large, which increases the reliability of the measurement.

All posts containing words that refer to any of these four conspiracy theories were extracted from the dataset. From these posts, a random sample of 200 posts was manually read and assessed. The manual assessment prompted some adjustments of the wordlists to assure an accurate measurement (see Table 10 for example words). The wordlists generated in total 1,923,070 hits for the whole period. To measure change over time, a monthly measure for each list (i.e., each conspiracy theory) was performed for the whole period.

Table 10. Examples of conspiracy words.

NWO	ZOG	White genocide	Great replacement
hidden hand	jewish cabal	white birthrates	Eurabia
new world order	JWO	kalergi-plan	islamization
one-world	organized jewry	miscegenation	creeping sharia

By using a method based on wordlists, we cannot determine how many people actually believe the theories, although by the choice of board (i.e. politics), we assume that the use of conspiracy words reflects a general interest in the corresponding conspiracy theories.

Figure 11 shows mentions of New World Order theories. After the US election in November 2016, there is a temporary dip in the mentions of New World Order theories, after which they are fairly stable until they increase at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020. In connection with the US election in November 2020, there is an unprecedented acceleration of mentions of New World Order-related themes.

<sup>144</sup> Lamberty, P., & Leiser, D. (2019). » Sometimes you just have to go in «—The link between conspiracy beliefs and political action.

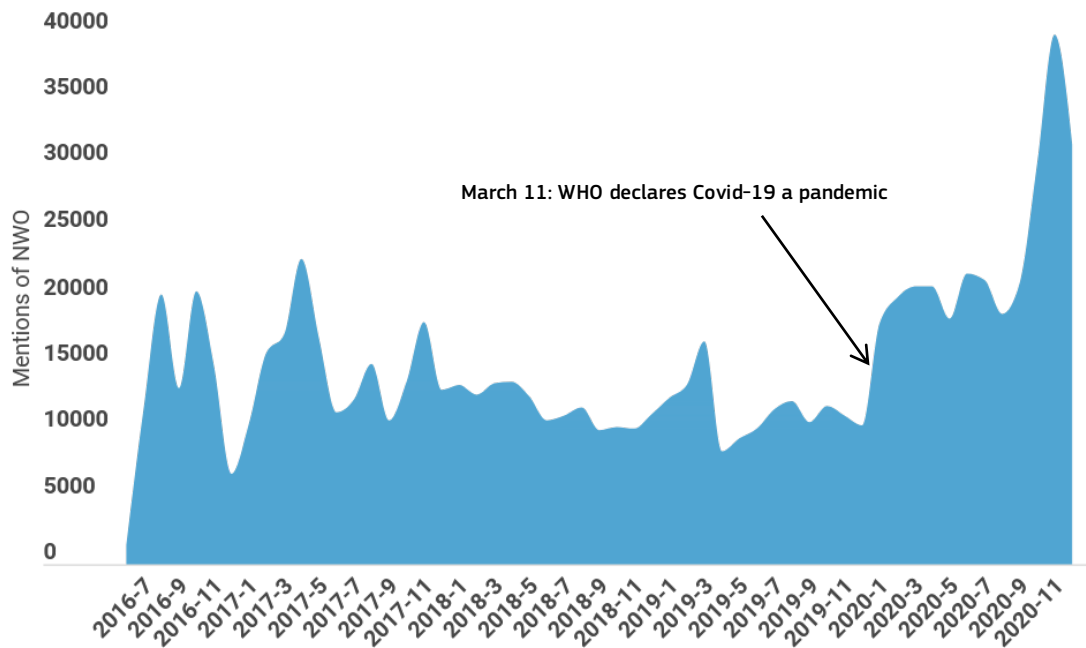


Figure 11. NWO-related word mentions on 4chan/pol/.

The ZOG-related words (Figure 12) also spiked with the pandemic, which was expected. However, over the three preceding years, the development differs from the NWO development in that there has been a steady increase, with a few spikes, since early 2017.

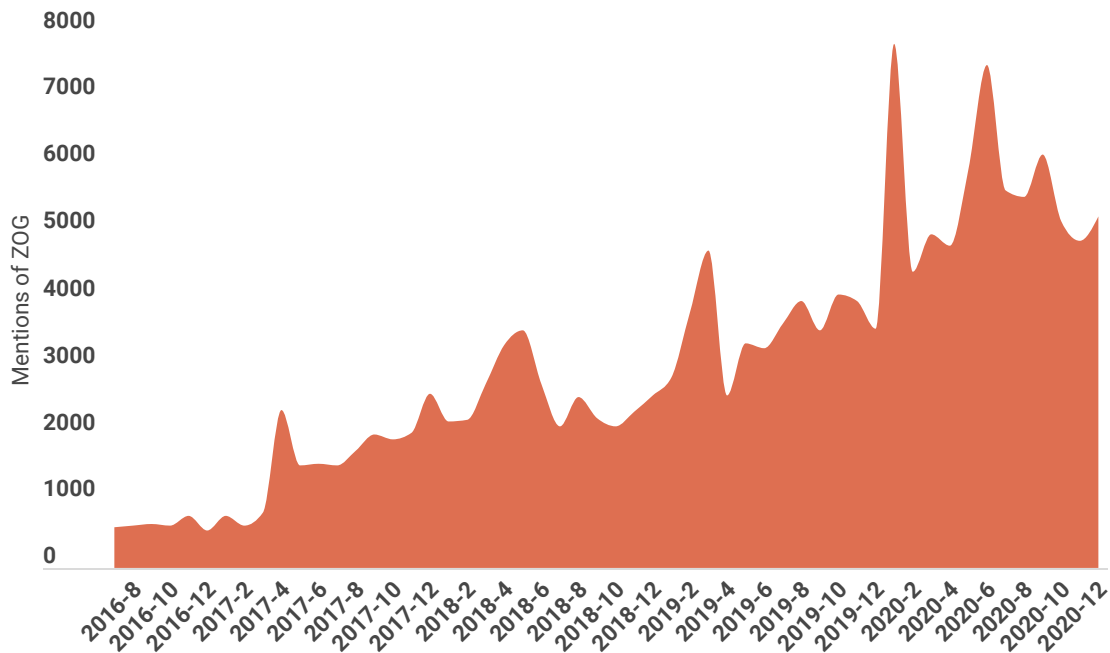


Figure 12. ZOG-related word mentions on 4chan/pol/.

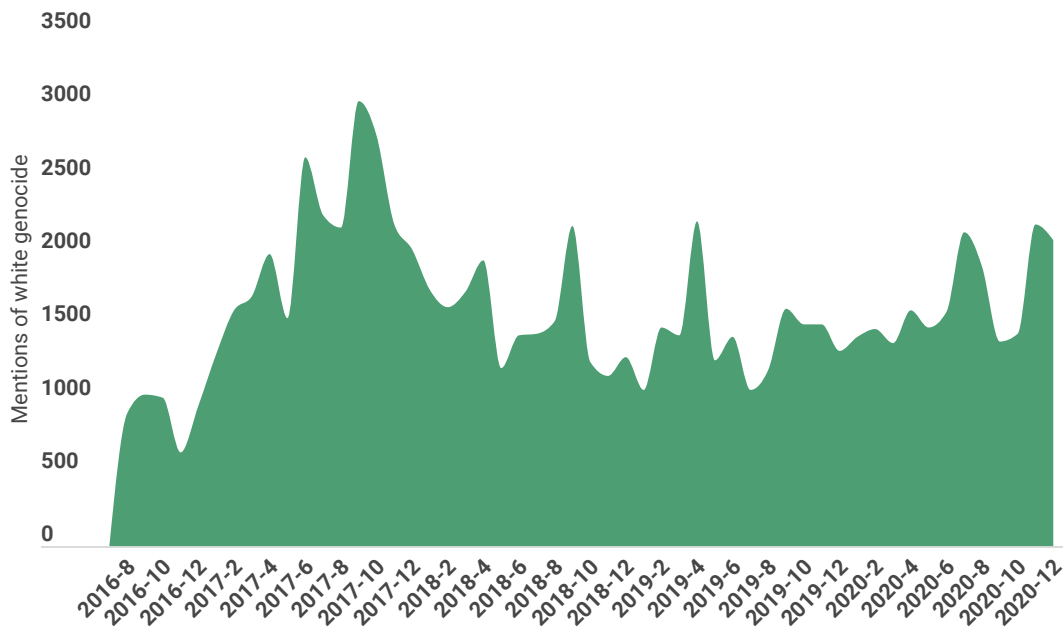


Figure 13. White Genocide-related word mentions on 4chan/pol/.

The increase of words related to White Genocide (Figure 13) was limited to a period between mid-2016 to mid-2017, since then there has been a constant fluctuation without neither an increase nor decrease over time. The highest point on the curve coincides with the Charlottesville rally in August 2017 (see also section 5.2). Words pertaining to a specifically Muslim replacement (e.g. ‘dhimmitude’, ‘Eurabia’, ‘creeping shariah’) showed a different trend (Figure 14). Sparsely mentioned to begin with, there was a slow but steady decrease over time. However, many of the spikes in the curve coincide with jihadist terror attacks in Europe, suggesting that anti-Muslim sentiment may be sparked by jihadist violence.

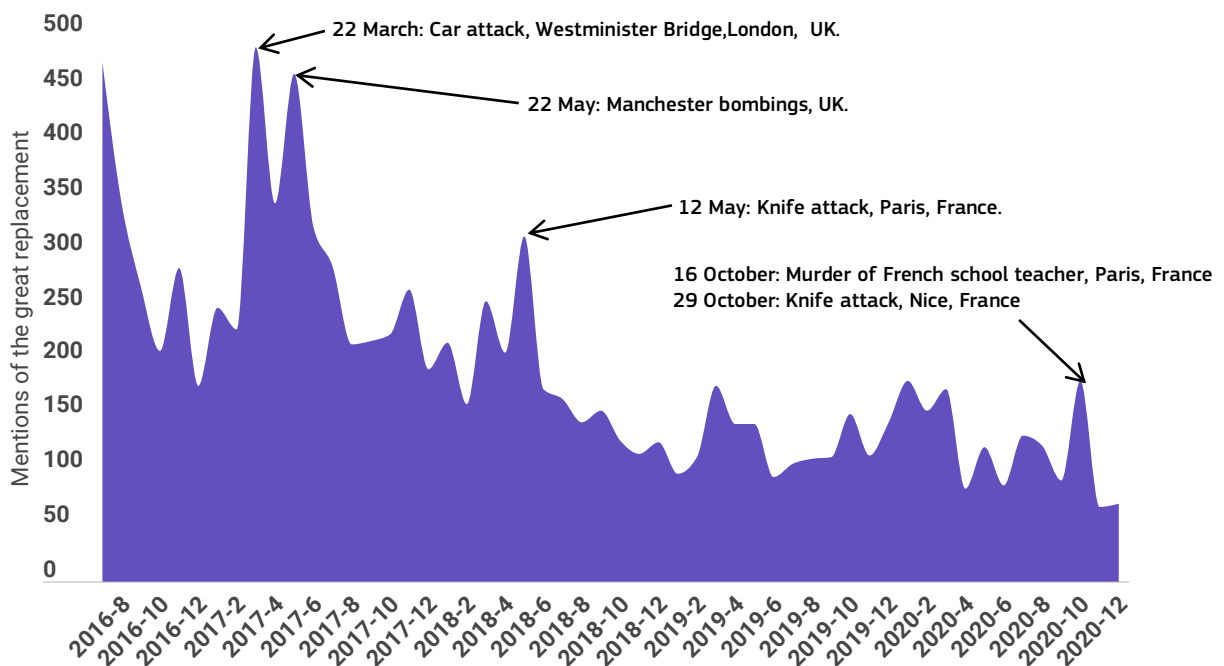


Figure 14. Great Replacement-related word mentions on 4chan/pol/, dates of jihadist terror attacks in Europe.

# Glorification of Violence

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# 9. Glorification of Violence

## 9.1. VRWE and Online Influence

Between late 2018 and early 2020, several violent attacks in New Zealand, the US, Germany and Norway were committed by individuals with little or no connection to extremist organisations or terrorist groups. What they had in common was that they had been active in digital environments. The offenders seem to have been radicalized mainly online and acted more or less alone. All attacks were directed towards groups that traditionally have been seen as enemies in an RWE context: Jews, Muslims, and immigrants. In several cases, the perpetrators outlined their ideologies, motivations, and tactical choices in manifestos they themselves published on the internet. The concept of terrorists publishing manifestos is not new; In 1995 Ted Kaczynski, also known as the Unabomber, published a manifesto called *Industrial Society and Its Future*, that eventually led to the revelation of his identity and his subsequent capture. Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik distributed a 1500-page manifesto on the internet just before carrying out a terror attack killing 77 people in Oslo and Utøya in July 2011. Kaczynski's and Breivik's manifestos have become a source of inspiration to others. For instance, Breivik's manifesto inspired a former Coast Guard lieutenant and self-described white nationalist who in 2019 was charged for planning an attack inspired by Breivik's strategy and ideology.<sup>145</sup>

It seems online connections to extremist ideologies could be equally important for inspiring violence as connections to 'on the ground' groups.<sup>146</sup> While there are multiple pathways to violent radicalization, some elements of radicalization can be observed in the offender's online writings.<sup>147</sup> In this section, we chronologically outline seven VRWE lone-actor attacks, while describing the patterns of influence that can be observed in their digital communication and how it has been received within VRWE communities.

### **Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, USA.**

On 27 October 2018, Robert Gregory Bowers entered the Tree of Life congregation in Pittsburgh, where he shot eleven people to death and wounded another six. A few hours earlier, Bowers had used Gab to tell others about his attack plans. Bowers last words on Gab before the attack were 'Screw your optics, I'm going in'. These words are now used as a call for action among VRWEs.

### **Christchurch Mosque shootings, New Zealand.**

On March 15, 2019, Brenton Tarrant killed 51 people and injured another 50 in a mass shooting in the Masjid al Noor Mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand. Besides live casting the attack on Facebook, Tarrant also posted a link to a manifesto on 8chan. The 74-page manifesto, entitled *The Great Replacement*, contained racist and anti-Muslim conspiracy theories. In the manifesto, Tarrant also pays tribute to previous violent VRWE offenders including Anders Behring Breivik, Anton Lundin Pettersson,<sup>148</sup> Luca Traini,<sup>149</sup> and Darren Osborne.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Berger, J.M. (2019) The Dangerous Spread of Extremist Manifestos. By sharing the writings of terrorists, media outlets can amplify their impact. *The Atlantic*, February 26, 2019.

<sup>146</sup> Guhl, J., and Davey, J. (2020). *A Safe Space to Hate: White Supremacist Mobilisation on Telegram*. London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

<sup>147</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. (2019). Lone offender. A Study of Lone Offender Terrorism in the United States (1972 –2015). Federal Bureau of Investigation. Behavioral Analysis Unit.

<sup>148</sup> Lundin Pettersson killed three people in a school attack in Trollhättan, Sweden in 2015.

<sup>149</sup> Traini shot 6 people in an attack with racist motives in Macerata, Italy in 2018.

<sup>150</sup> Osborne drove a car into a crowd outside Finsbury Park Mosque in London, England in 2017, killing one, injuring 10.

### **Poway synagogue shooting, California, USA.**

On 27 April 2019, the Chabad synagogue in Poway, California was attacked by John Timothy Earnest. One person died and two were injured in the shooting. Before the attack, a manifesto signed with Earnest's name was published on 8chan. The manifesto contained racist and antisemitic views and conspiracy theories and mentioned both Brenton Tarrant and Robert Bowers.

### **El Paso Shooting, Texas, USA.**

On 3 August 2019, Patrick Crusius killed 23 people and injured a further 23 in a shooting at a Walmart store in El Paso, USA. A manifesto titled 'The Inconvenient Truth' and assumedly written by Crusius was posted on 8chan before the attack. The manifesto is anti-immigrant and anti-Hispanic and promotes the 'Great Replacement' conspiracy theory (see Section 8.3). It also praises the shootings in Christchurch that happened five months earlier.

### **Al-Noor Islamic Centre Mosque shooting, Bærum, Norway.**

On 10 August 2019, Philip Manshaus fired several shots in the Al-Noor Islamic Centre Mosque in Bærum, Norway. Manshaus, wearing a helmet camera, attempted to broadcast the attack online in the style of Brenton Tarrant, but failed. Before the attack Manshaus published a post on Endchan paying tribute to the attacks in Christchurch, El Paso and Poway. Manshaus claimed to have been elected by 'Saint Tarrant' to perform his deed.

### **Halle Synagogue shooting, Halle, Germany .**

On 9 October 2019, Stephan Balliet, while livestreaming on the gaming platform Twitch, tried to enter the Jewish community centre and synagogue in Halle to execute a mass shooting. After failing to enter the synagogue, he randomly shot a woman on the street and yet another person in a Turkish restaurant. Balliet uploaded a manifesto to an imageboard called Meguca, that was later reposted to several other forums. In the antisemitic manifesto Balliet makes references to ZOG (see Section 8.1) and calls himself an 'anon' - an abbreviation for 'anonymous' that is used by online gamers and on the Chan forums.<sup>151</sup>

### **Hanau shootings, Hanau, Germany.**

On 19 February 2020, Tobias Rathjen opened fire in two shisha bars in Hanau, a small German town with a 20 per cent immigrant population, killing eleven and wounding five. After the shooting, Rathjen went back to his apartment, killed his mother and committed suicide. Sometime before, Rathjen published a manifesto on his website, expressing delusional ideas about being guided by voices inside his head and being followed by secret agents, but also hate for migrants and people from the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Koehler, D. (2019). The Halle, Germany, Synagogue Attack and the Evolution of the Far-Right Terror Threat. CTC Sentinel 12, no. 11: 16

<sup>152</sup> Cohen, K and Pelzer, B. (2020) En analys av Tobias Rathjens manifest [An analysis of Tobias Rathjens manifesto]. Swedish Defence Research Agency. FOI Memo: 7042.



## 9.2. 'Saints' and 'Heroes'

The pattern of influence that seems to prevail among VRWE offenders coincides with the emergence of an online subculture where a handful of violent offenders are praised for their deeds and commended for successfully killing others. These offenders are regarded as heroes status and gain a following of people who find them inspirational.<sup>153</sup> For instance, Dylann Roof, who perpetrated a racially motivated mass shooting at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015, has received a following who regard him as a hero and an inspiration. The following, calling themselves 'The Bowl Patrol' in mocking honour of Roof's characteristic haircut, is active on several social media platforms posting memes with slogans like 'Dylann Roof did nothing wrong' and 'Take me to church', and icon-like pictures where Roof is portrayed with a halo around his head. The FBI has averted several planned violent acts inspired by Dylann Roof.<sup>154</sup> Another violent offender who has received hero status mainly in eco-fascist circles is Ted Kaczynski (also known as the Unabomber) whose manifesto expresses views and tactic proposals that are in line with eco-fascist ideals. Kaczynski-inspired memes contain inspirational quotes from his manifesto, pictures of his bookshelf and the cottage where he lived.

The practice of portraying violent offenders as heroes often manifests as memes where the offender is portrayed to look like a painting of a Catholic saint, sometimes accompanied by slogans like 'Follow the Saints – Because those who follow them will become Saints'. Another kind of iconography references gaming culture by portraying mass shootings like first person shooter games. Images showing the names of mass murderers and a count for the number of victims are paired with slogans like 'Will you make it to the leaderboard? In the fight for white survival'. In plain language, this culture is maintained by rendering the killers titles such as 'saint', 'knight', 'commander' or 'chad'<sup>155</sup>. The point with saint culture is to encourage others to aspire to the glory of a heroic 'Chad' or 'Saint' by becoming terrorists as well, like when Norwegian mosque shooter Philip Manshaus claimed to have been 'elected by Saint Tarrant' to attack a mosque.<sup>156</sup>

To understand the origins and lifespan of saint culture, we have measured the number of mentions of known VRWE offenders as 'saint', 'commander', 'holy', 'chad', or 'knight' on 4chan/pol/ since February 2018. As can be seen in Figure 15, the practice of referring to VRWE offenders as saints and heroes had its starting point in the aftermath of the Christchurch shooting in March 2019, when Brenton Tarrant was dubbed a saint by his sympathisers. Another peak appeared in August 2019, when the shootings in El Paso and Baerum took place. Since then the trend has been slightly waning yet mainly stable.

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<sup>153</sup> Beauchamp, Z. (2019) An online subculture celebrating the Charleston church shooter appears to be inspiring copycat plots. *Vox*, February 7 2019.

<sup>154</sup> Hall, E. (2019). A Couple Obsessed With Mass Shootings Was Charged With Plotting A Massacre At A Bar. *Buzz Feed News*, 3 January, 2019.

<sup>155</sup> A Chad is an alpha male and while the term has a history of being used by incels and other manosphere groups to referens alpha males that are sexually active. The term is also used to refer to males that are something to look up to and that are particularly attractive and confident.

<sup>156</sup> Am, A. B., & Weiman, G. (2020). Fabricated Martyrs: The Warrior-Saint Icons of Far-Right Terrorism. *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14: 5.

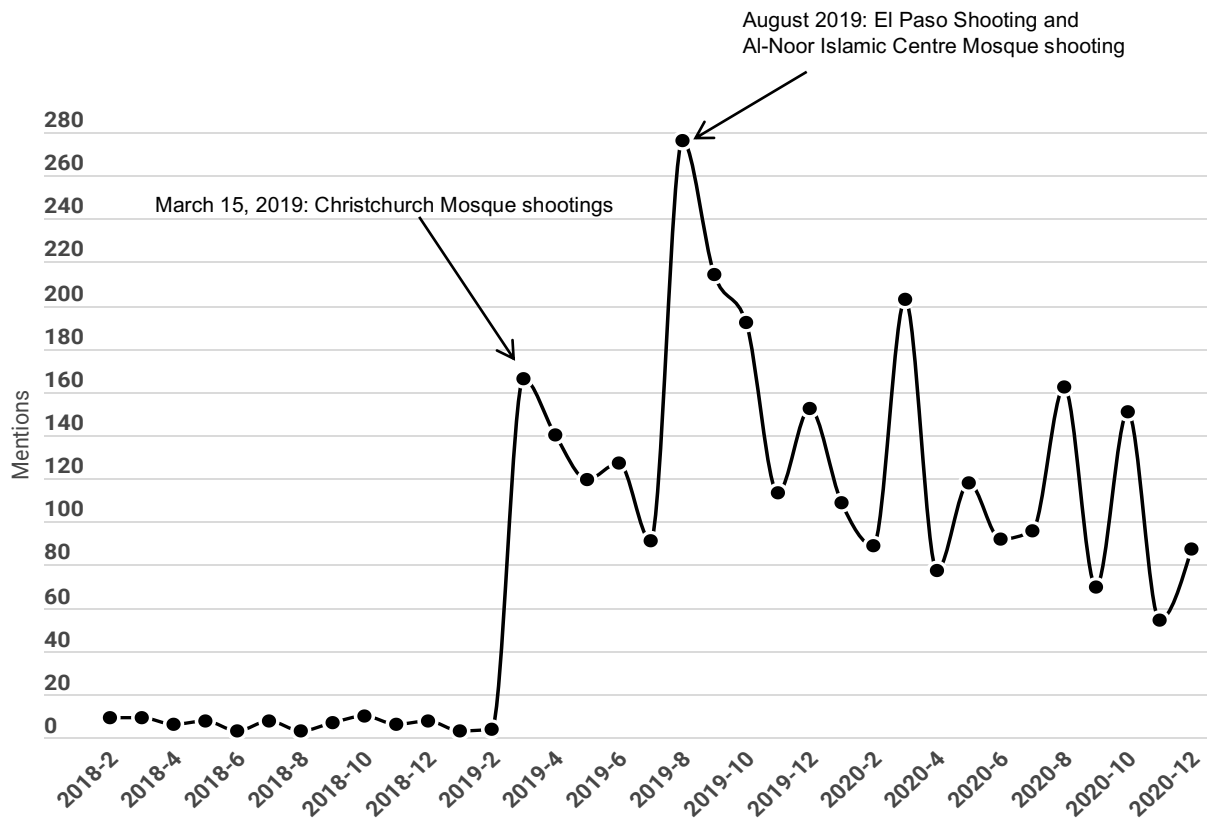


Figure 15. Number of mentions of lone offenders as saints/commanders/knights/holy/warriors/chads during 2018-2020 on 4chan/pol/.

### 9.3. Siege: Explicit Calls for Violence

*Siege Culture* (sometimes spelled *Siege Kultur* or *Siege Kulture*) is an online accelerationist VRWE subculture based on a series of newsletters written in the early 1980s by James Mason for the National Socialist Liberation Front (NSLF). The newsletters were later published as the book *Siege: The Collected Writings of James Mason*. *Siege* promotes racist violence, antisemitic conspiracy theories, and Holocaust denial. It also urges lone-actor or small cell terrorist attacks as a way to create chaos and spark a civil war that will destroy the society as it is today. The goal is to rebuild a new society for white nationalists. *Siege* has been listed as essential reading for several terrorist organisations and since 2015 it has been promoted online since 2015 by members of VRWE organisation Atomwaffen Division. Between 2017 and 2019, there was a website called *Siege Culture*, from where the subculture has dispersed to different social media where individuals inspired by the work of Mason publish their own interpretations and discuss *Siege* tactics. Images with references to pop culture, symbols from WW2 combined with messages inciting violence are also used to promote *Siege*. *Siege Culture* has inspired a generation of young national socialists to engage in calls for independent terror cells to carry out a race war.<sup>157</sup>

To find out to what extent *Siege culture* is discussed on different platforms, we counted the occurrences of *Siege*-related keywords<sup>158</sup> on extracted Endchan/pol/, 4chan/pol/, 8kun/pnd/, Gab and Stormfront. Reddit was included as a reference group. To adjust for the different sizes of the

<sup>157</sup> The Counter Extremism Project. James Mason's *Siege*: Ties to Extremists. Available online: <https://www.counterextremism.com/james-masons-siege-ties-to-extremists>

<sup>158</sup> The list included words such as *Siege*, James Mason, leaderless resistance, race war, Universal Order, Atomwaffen, Siegekultur, Feuerkrieg Division, Sonnenkrieg Division, Total drop-out, Hail terror, universal order, Charles Manson, Turner Diaries and Mein Kampf.

platforms, the results were normalized.<sup>159</sup> The results are shown in Figure 16. Among the platforms that were included in our analysis, Endchan/pol/ had the highest presence of Siege related discussions followed by 4chan/pol/, 8kun/pnd/ and Stormfront. Gab had a significantly lower prevalence of Siege-related discussions.

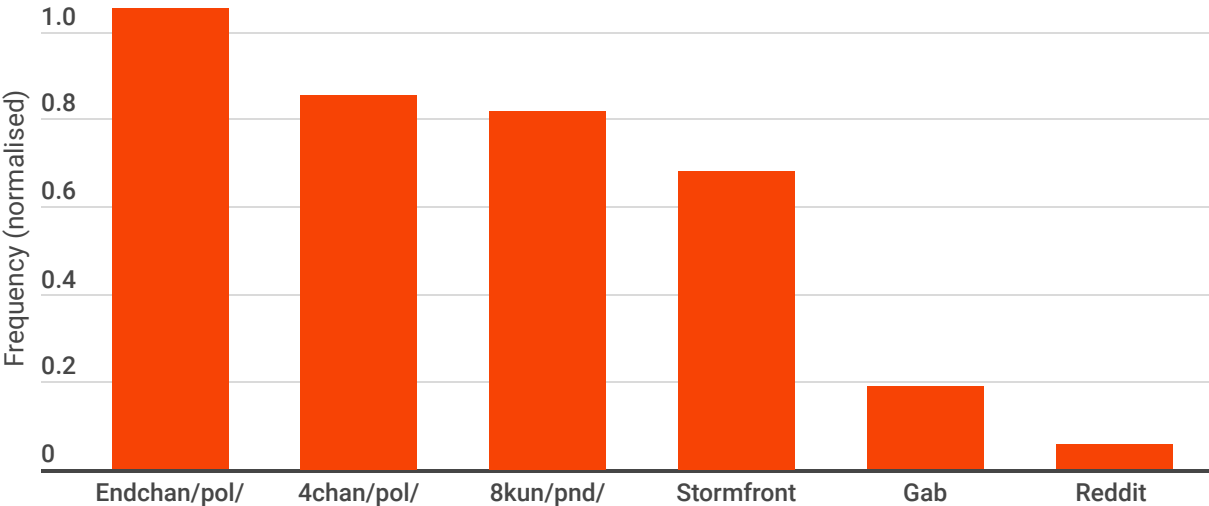


Figure 16. References to Siege Culture on the different platforms.

<sup>159</sup> The number of occurrences of Siege words were divided with the number of words for each platform. The result was multiplied with 100.

# Concluding Remarks

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# 10. Concluding Remarks

## 10.1. Summary

In this report we have studied several different aspects of violent right-wing extremist (VRWE) content in digital environments. Due to inherent relativity of the concept of 'extremism' as well as the constant exchange of ideas and terminology between violent and non-violent proponents of far-right ideologies, we have included several non-VRWE digital environments in our mappings. Special attention has been paid to what we call minimum-moderation platforms, such as Gab and the so-called 'Chans'. These platforms have served as important communication nodes for many of the VRWE offenders that have committed acts of terrorism during the last years.

Besides a mapping of the global and local online far-right scenes (Chapter 3), we have performed several studies on the prevalence and types of VRWE content on different platforms. VRWE content consists of textual or visual messages that express acceptance, condoning, justification or acclamation of violence for the sake of a radical nationalistic ideal. The different strains of radical nationalism include for instance identitarianism, counter-jihad, National Socialism, white supremacy, and eco-fascism.

Justification of ideological violence takes different forms. The presumptive targets of violence can be described as so threatening and malicious that they need to be disarmed, or so repugnant and worthless that they fall outside the scope of interhuman morality. This justification strategy includes using toxic language (i.e., hate speech and severely degrading comments) about the targets, dehumanization and conspiracy theories. Toxic language, dehumanization and conspiracy theories have been examined in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 as parts of narratives that create a rationale for violence against the perceived enemy. We have also studied which groups of people appear as enemies in these narratives. Toxic language targeting non-whites (e.g. people with dark skin, Mexicans, Asians, Arabs, people of Pakistani descent, Turks, and indigenous peoples) was very common on the minimal moderation platforms. Dehumanizing language was also targeted at non-whites on Stormfront, Gab and the Chans. Jewish people, although also dehumanized, were somewhat less exposed to toxic language. On the other hand, conspiracy theories targeting Jews seem to have become steadily more popular since 2016. Conspiracy theories targeting Muslims seem to be discussed more in conjunction with jihadist attacks in Europe. Conspiracy theories, dehumanization and toxic language are also directed to people presumed to be white, if considered to be political opponents, part of a malevolent 'elite' or engage in interracial relationships.

Another factor that can facilitate violence is the idealization of armed battle and glorification of known VRWE offenders and terrorists. Perpetrators of violent acts, or the practice of violence itself, is sometimes glorified to the point of mythological heroism. This justification strategy is examined in Chapter 9, where the accelerationist Siege culture and the idolization of violent offenders is described, along with a mapping of the pattern of influence between violent VRWE attackers. Violent VRWE attackers frequently use their social media accounts to refer to their predecessors as role-models, and occasionally take part of what we have described as 'Saint' Culture, a practice of referring to mass murderers as 'saints' that, according to our study, became popular after the Christchurch attack in 2019.

## 10.2. Limitations of the Study

While almost all platforms have content that can be described as VRWE, this study is limited to analysis of a small fraction of online environments. We have focused mainly on some of the minimal moderation platforms that have no clear ideological profile but may be seen as 'fringe' to many. Several of the large social media platforms have user rules that forbid VRWE content and are actively moderating the content on their platforms. Despite this, VRWE content is present almost everywhere since VRWE content can be communicated by using deliberate misspellings and other dog whistles to avoid moderation. Although there is a presence of VRWE content on almost all platforms, the ability to analyse content is limited since some of the social media platforms maintain technological barriers to prevent automated processing of their content.

Using computational technologies to study aspects of VRWE allows us to analyse more data, but there are also limitations to most technologies. When using text analysis we have to be aware that all technologies lack a fundamental understanding of the meaning of the data that they process and therefore all automatic analysis needs to be complemented with human analysis to assure correctness. The demographic information that is presented in this report is collected using the web analysis tool SimilarWeb. Although the numbers can give us some insights into the locations of the visitors, it is important to remember that there are different solutions for surfing anonymously, making it hard to determine which countries the visitors really come from. There are also several reasons for visiting a website, for example researchers, analysts, journalists and law enforcement agencies have also reasons to visit VRWE platforms.

## 10.3. Handling Online VRWE Content

The verbally aggressive and sometimes violence-inciting online culture that thrives on minimal-moderation platforms has provided motivation for several VRWE attacks in recent years. It is therefore necessary to discuss whether VRWE content in digital environments should be restricted, and if so, which methods should be used. National legislative measures have proven to be inefficient on the global internet. For example, Germany and Austria have implemented laws against Holocaust denial, and known Holocaust deniers have been sentenced under these laws; yet their writings remain readily available on the net. Also, the balance between removing as much harmful content as possible on the one hand and protecting people's freedom of speech on the other, may be a difficult one to achieve in this case. In this respect, the providers of large multi-national platforms are much better equipped to restrict VRWE content via their user guidelines. In his 2018 book on content moderation, Tarleton Gillespie at Microsoft Research argues that the larger platforms are shapers of public discourse, and as such should take on the responsibility of questioning what is acceptable in online communication and what is not; According to Gillespie, the platforms should act as 'custodians of the internet'.<sup>160</sup>

Content removal and banning or suspension of members who post offensive material on large platforms efficiently lessens the reach of VRWE content by making it unavailable to the broader audience. However, it does not seem to silence those who wish to produce and disseminate such content. The flight to minimal moderation platforms seems to correspond in time with bans on the larger platforms.<sup>161</sup> Moderation policies are evaded by switching platforms or even establishing their own. Minimal moderation platforms can provide a safe space for VRWE content, while, in contrast to

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<sup>160</sup> Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press.

<sup>161</sup> Lord, R. & Murray, A. (2019). When Twitter bans, Gab grows. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 12 March, 2019.

dedicated platforms, providing the possibility to reach a new audience that did not initially join to discuss VRWE topics. Another way to try to reduce the reach of harmful content is to make it less accessible. This is something that can be done by search engine companies. For instance, in 2016 Google altered their autocomplete function so that the search phrase 'Are Jews' was no longer autocompleted by the word 'evil'.<sup>162</sup>

## 10.4. Directions for Future Research

The identification of potentially harmful content is fraught with difficulties, especially when it is not published by a known VRWE organization. The scale of activity on social media, forums and websites, 24 hours a day, renders manual moderation infeasible. While technologies for automatic classification of images and text have been taking significant leaps forward during the last years, we still have very limited knowledge about how well such methods work on new data and on new tasks. Further development is required for reliable automated technologies that can be used to detect and analyse VRWE content. Such automated methods should then serve to support a manual assessment, which necessitates more research into an effective combination of automatic and manual methods. A few examples of what future research should focus on are:

- Development of algorithms that can be used to detect harmful content in different languages. Such algorithms need to be adapted to the context they are to be used in – there is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution.
- Get a deeper understanding of the processes wherein VRWE content is created and distributed in different digital environments.
- Development of methods and technologies for threat assessment of written communication to identify individuals online that have an increased risk for violent behaviour.
- An ongoing analysis of the digital VRWE landscape and its constant changes in terms of preferred platforms, trends, subcultures, and jargon.

## 10.5. Conclusion

While there is much ongoing activity by numerous stakeholders to reduce the presence of VRWE content in digital environments, it will remain nearly impossible to entirely eliminate such content without impinging on the fundamental rights and values of an open society in the context of a global internet. Thus we must adapt to a reality where some extent of potentially harmful material will stay available. The focus must be on keeping this amount of available material as small as possible, while respecting freedom of speech and other fundamental rights and values. In addition, there must be a focus on reducing the harm done by such material. This work can be divided into long-term harm reduction and short-term harm reduction. Both approaches are equally important, and both require further research. Long-term harm reduction involves for instance presenting alternative narratives or encouraging deliberation instead of affective polarization. This requires an in-depth knowledge about the sociopsychological mechanisms that cause people to create, spread or act upon VRWE content. Short-term harm reduction involves the development of methods for risk assessment of digital content as well as sophisticated methods for minimally invasive surveillance when needed. Such methods require, among other skills, constantly updated knowledge about the digital environments wherein harmful content may appear. At all times, a public discussion regarding the sensitive balance between all people's right to integrity and freedom on the one hand and their right to protection on the other hand, should be kept alive.

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<sup>162</sup> Gibbs, S. (2016). Google alters autocomplete to remove 'are Jews evil' suggestion. *The Guardian*, 5 December, 2016.

# Appendix

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# Appendix

## Links to other platforms

Table A1. Most common links from the different platforms.

4chan/pol/			8kun/pnd/		
domain	links	links (%)	domain	links	links (%)
archived.moe	62205259	93.59	archive.is	4146	11.84
www.youtube.com	850116	1.28	archive.vn	2701	7.71
youtu.be	520938	0.78	www.youtube.com	2048	5.85
twitter.com	244373	0.37	archive.fo	1555	4.44
en.wikipedia.org	151590	0.23	archive.md	1538	4.39
archive.is	93250	0.14	twitter.com	1320	3.77
archive.fo	87782	0.13	files.catbox.moe	1142	3.26
www.bitchute.com	84427	0.13	web.archive.org	1126	3.22
pastebin.com	79907	0.12	www.bitchute.com	891	2.54
archive.4plebs.org	56122	0.08	en.wikipedia.org	725	2.07
m.youtube.com	41726	0.06	youtu.be	701	2.00
streamable.com	36521	0.05	archive.ph	612	1.75
Stormfront			VNN Forum		
domain	links	links (%)	domain	links	links (%)
en.wikipedia.org	307143	3.7	www.youtube.com	203718	23.9
www.youtube.com	219503	2.65	en.wikipedia.org	42681	5.01
www.dailymail.co.uk	56177	0.68	www.dailymail.co.uk	15480	1.82
news.bbc.co.uk	33751	0.41	vanguardnewsnetwork.com	12748	1.5
news.yahoo.com	23826	0.29	youtu.be	7675	0.9
www.google.com	22721	0.27	www.stormfront.org	5186	0.61
twitter.com	20494	0.25	www.stormfront.org	5186	0.61
www.facebook.com	20251	0.24	en.kremlin.ru	5164	0.61
www.bbc.co.uk	18326	0.22	www.dailystormer.com	4477	0.53
www.telegraph.co.uk	17917	0.22	news.yahoo.com	4405	0.52
www.cnn.com	17720	0.21	www.amazon.com	4177	0.49
www.foxnews.com	17204	0.21	www.mid.ru	4059	0.48
Gab					
domain	links	links (%)			
www.youtube.com	2485246	10.43			
youtu.be	2007905	8.43			
twitter.com	1302802	5.47			
www.breitbart.com	702278	2.95			
kek.gg	607945	2.55			
www.thegatewaypundit.com	488715	2.05			
www.infowars.com	333905	1.4			
www.bitchute.com	325116	1.36			
t.co	306902	1.29			
www.zerohedge.com	262225	1.1			
www.foxnews.com	259415	1.09			
www.dailymail.co.uk	214695	0.9			

## Visitors

Table A2. Top European countries sending traffic to the sites according to SimilarWeb. The table include percentages indicating the share of the total traffic between April and June 2021.

Gab	BitChute	VK	4chan	8kun	Endchan
United Kingdom (4.79%)	Germany (7.60%)	Ukraine (6.45%)	United Kingdom (5.69%)	United Kingdom (4.70%)	Lithuania (7.66%)
Germany (3.42%)	United Kingdom (6.98%)	Moldova (0.79%)	Germany (5.22%)	Germany (3.05%)	Germany (7.10%)
Finland (1.09%)	Poland (2.20%)	Germany (0.49%)	Sweden (2.9%)	France (1.96%)	Hungary (5.52%)
Netherlands (0.95%)	France (1.94%)	Turkey (0.43%)	France (2.51%)	Polen (1.8%)	Greece (3.07%)
France (0.93%)	Netherlands (1.49%)	Georgia (0.27%)	Finland (2.37%)	Italy (1.58%)	Ukraine (2.5%)
Spain (0.82%)	Sweden (1.36%)	Latvia (0.26%)	Netherlands (2.01%)	Finland (1.58%)	UK (2.07%)
Czech Republic (0.65%)	Finland (1.14%)	UK (0.21%)	Poland (1.67%)	Netherlands (1.34%)	Finland (1.90%)
Switzerland (0.53%)	Ireland (1.08%)	Estonia (0.21%)	Denmark (1.46%)	Sweden (1.14%)	Poland (1.80%)
Norway (0.36%)	Switzerland (1.02%)	Poland (0.19%)	Czech Republic (1.38%)	Switzerland (0.78%)	France (1.63%)
Poland (0.35%)	Spain (0.99%)	France (0.16%)	Norway (1.32%)	Czech Republic (0.59%)	Austria (1.39%)

## Flags on 4chan

Table A3. The presence of flags that are not countries on 4chan/pol/.

Flag	No of posts	Percentage of posts with flags
Anarchist	269604	0.132
Anarcho-Capitalist	781056	0.382
Black Lives Matter	312442	0.153
Commie	365954	0.179
Confederate	831392	0.407
DEUS VULT	782426	0.383
Democrat	241285	0.118
Fascist	765350	0.374
Hippie	236026	0.115
Jihadi	147597	0.072
Kekistani	574637	0.281
LGBT	346167	0.169
Muslim	173036	0.085
Nazi	1240123	0.607
Pirate	1006825	0.493
Tree Hugger	335935	0.164
Unknown	286477	0.14
White Supremacist	348421	0.17
Other	6060349	2.965

Table A4. The presence of European flags on 4chan/pol/.

Country	No of posts	Percentage of posts with flags
United Kingdom	14246899	6.97
Germany	5654530	2.766
Netherlands	2438802	1.193
Sweden	2238806	1.095
France	2117183	1.036
Poland	2063863	1.01
Finland	1907586	0.933
Russian Federation	1673423	0.819
Italy	1448243	0.709
Norway	1388766	0.679
Ireland	1207513	0.591
Spain	1162535	0.569
Romania	1024416	0.501
Portugal	963842	0.472
Denmark	830203	0.406
Austria	803587	0.393
Belgium	787677	0.385
Croatia	696197	0.341
Greece	676628	0.331
Bulgaria	599897	0.293
Europe	590356	0.289
Switzerland	562980	0.275
Hungary	536058	0.262
Czech Republic	485075	0.237
Slovenia	439419	0.215
Estonia	352826	0.173
Latvia	302565	0.148
Lithuania	290668	0.142
Turkey	257186	0.126
Ukraine	233743	0.114
Slovakia	179721	0.088
Catalonia	159803	0.078
Macedonia	131604	0.064
Iceland	105454	0.052
Malta	71120	0.035
Montenegro	69713	0.034
Albania	67082	0.033
Luxembourg	62924	0.031
Cyprus	61119	0.03
Belarus	31931	0.016
Moldova	25306	0.012
Isle of Man	11760	0.006
Aland	9787	0.005
Jersey	9679	0.005
Greenland	9047	0.004
Faroe Islands	7073	0.003
Andorra	1964	0.001
Guernsey	2521	0.001
Holy See (Vatican City State)	1401	0.001
Liechtenstein	1738	0.001
Svalbard and Jan Mayen	2177	0.001
Gibraltar	700	0
Kosovo	364	0
San Marino	340	0

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