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The European Far Right and Islamist Extremism on Twitter: From Radicalisation to Political Participation

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Nathalie PATON
PhD, School for Advanced Studies in
the Social Sciences (EHESS),
FRANCE
e-mail: nathalie.paton@gmail.com

Grant HELM
PhD Candidate, University of
Lancaster, UNITED KINGDOM
e-mail: grant@moonshotteam.com

Anne Birgitta NILSEN Professor,
Oslo Metropolitan University
(Oslomet), NORWAY
e-mail: abin@oslomet.no

Tristan SALORD
Research Engineer, INREA,
FRANCE
e-mail: tristan.salord@inrae.fr

Mark DECHESNE
Professor, University of Leiden,
NETHERLANDS
e-mail: m.dechesne@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

Guillaume CABANAC Professor,
University of Toulouse, FRANCE
e-mail: guillaume.cabanac@univ-tlse3.fr

Alexandros SAKELLARIOU
Professor, Panteion University
(PUA), GREECE
e-mail: sociology.panteion@gmail.com

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Abstract: This article explores the results of a study on media participation on Twitter in 2018/2019 perceived as contributing to far right and Islamist radical ideologies, in 7 European countries. By combining online ethnography and big data approaches, we see that online far right extremism in Europe is active and ranks are growing, while Islamist extremism has been incapacitated in sharing controversial forms of expression. We describe how the far right uses Twitter as a means for political activism, while Islamist extremists offer lifestyle information, related to local branches of faith, using Twitter as a storefront that re-routes users to other platforms. We consider resources for action, notably on the far right. World leaders influence followers online and support a global conversation between users that paves the way to a far right European milieu thriving on Twitter. To conclude, we delve into the notions of radicalisation and political participation to emphasise the asymmetry between the two forms of media participation in respect to academic discourses and big tech and States' practises.

Keywords: far right extremism, Europe, social media, Islamist extremism, political participation

L'extrême droite et l'extrémisme islamiste sur Twitter : de la radicalisation à la participation politique

Résumé : Cet article explore les résultats d'une enquête sur Twitter entre 2018-2019 portant sur la participation médiatique aux idéologies de l'extrême droite et de l'extrémisme islamiste, dans 7 pays européens. En combinant des approches d'ethnographie en ligne et de big data, nous montrons que l'extrême droite est active, tandis que l'extrémisme islamiste est mis à mal dans sa capacité à exprimer des idées controversées. Nous décrivons les deux répertoires d'action : l'extrême droite utilise Twitter comme moyen d'activisme politique ; les islamistes extrémistes y partagent des informations relatives à un style de vie, en s'appuyant sur des interprétations locales de la foi, et emploient Twitter comme une vitrine. Puis, nous considérons les ressources à l'action susceptibles d'amener les utilisateurs à la radicalisation, notamment pour l'extrême droite. Nous expliquons comment l'identité de groupe, liée à une conversation globale, est soutenue par les dirigeants mondiaux, et cela ouvre la voie à un milieu européen d'extrême droite. Pour conclure, nous approfondissons les notions de radicalisation et de participation politique pour souligner que l'asymétrie tient certes aux participations médiatiques des citoyens, mais aussi aux discours académiques et aux pratiques des big tech comme des États.

Mots-clés : extrême droite, extrémisme islamiste, Europe, réseaux sociaux, participation politique

Introduction

Studying Islamist Extremism and the Far Right in a Cross-country Perspective

This paper explores the results of a two-year study on Twitter investigating citizens' media participation in 2018/2019, perceived as contributing to far right and Islamist extremism ideologies, in seven European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom) to further understand the role of social media in the process of engagement in radical causes.

In little under a decade, we have witnessed a rise of the far right in major democracies with their election at heads of State, such as in the United States and Brazil. Such surges of extremism, while not limited to anti-Islamist arguments, are nonetheless fuelled by them throughout Western countries. In parallel, Islamist extremism has made its way into the daily lives of European citizens with a number of terrorist attacks over the last twenty years, as well as the highly-mediatized departure of European citizens to Syria and Iraq to fight for the Islamic State. These general tendencies are discussed in this paper based on field observations from seven European countries.

To understand how political extremism shapes the contemporary world, research benefits from comparative perspectives. We do so by targeting a group of European countries, currently experiencing strong radicalisation trends with an increase in far right votes and/or Islamist extremism. Dealing with political participation within the European setting provides a standpoint to observe common trends regarding how the issues of radicalisation and extremism emerge, as well as how they are perceived in relation to a more global geopolitical landscape.

Islamist extremism and the far right are amalgamated here in the expression radicalisation. Like extremism, radicalisation is a relational concept reflecting distance from moderate, mainstream or status quo positions. However, radicalisation and extremism are not equated in this paper. Rather radicalisation is defined here as “the process by which individuals or groups come to embrace attitudes, or engage in actions, that support violence in the pursuit of extremist causes.”¹ This makes its definition path-dependent upon what is understood as ‘extremism’. Extremism refers to beliefs and behaviour that seek a conformist, homogenous society based on ideological tenets achieved, maintained or defended by force, violence, hierarchy and the prioritisation of uniformity over diversity and collective over individual goals. In this sense, extremism is rather a belief system, while radicalisation is a process leading to extremism. Both, however, are understood as forms of political participation. They are forms of collective action leaning towards destruction, but nonetheless, they fall within the spectrum of engagement and political practices. In this paper, we intend to

¹ The definition of the concept as exploited in the H2020 DARE project can be found at the following link: <http://www.dare-h2020.org/concepts.html>

discuss radicalisation in Europe in a cross-country perspective to better understand the making of contemporary forms of political participation in its most extreme expressions.

The role of the Internet in the phenomena of radicalisation

It is a well-known fact that far right and Islamist extremist organisations alike have used big tech platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube or Twitter, to rally their audiences, engage new recruits and build a larger political movement.

The notion of targeted ‘recruitment’ on social network sites, and possible ‘self-radicalisation’ through one’s Internet uses, triggered a debate starting in the years 2005/2010 in line with the idea that violence spread online. Youth were identified as a target for ‘fertilisers’ or ‘radicalisers’ (O’Neill & McGrory, 2006; Hoffman, 2009). Papers evoked the strategies deployed by Al Qaeda (Cheong & Halverson, 2010; Venhaus, 2010) or ISIS to encourage western-born Muslims to identify with Islamist extremism (Picart, 2015; Saleh, 2014). Since then, some of the dominant Islamist terrorist organisations have diminished in force in the field, especially with the collapse of ISIS territorially in 2018. Simultaneously, takedown campaigns have become commonplace online, preventing any actual direct recruitment, causing the whole academic debate to move away from what still takes place online on major platforms in support of Islamist extremism.

In general, concern in academia has shifted from Islamist extremism to media participation of the far right in social networking sites (Medina-Serrano et al. 2018; Neudert et al., 2017), and its role in the radicalisation process (Hassan et al. 2018; Koehler., 2014). Beyond academic debates, national states take these threats more seriously, as is the case in the Netherlands, for example, where the Dutch security services have expressed concern about the rise of the far right and the role that social media has in the spreading of extreme-right content (AIVD, 2018).

Whatever the ideological standpoint, social networking platforms provide access to digital arenas of public debate and large communities of practices that could pave the way to the development of networks of like-minded people (Postmes et al. 2014). In an era when counter-hegemonic groups may emerge through counter-narratives, when censorship from gatekeepers is weakened and know-how in terms of political tactics, techniques, and strategies is shared openly and freely (Paton, 2015), it is important to pursue the scientific understanding of how social media provide means for radical ideologies to spread. We do so by focusing on digital uses on Twitter. The decision to focus on Twitter is based on a burgeoning body of academic literature highlighting the volume (Berger & Morgan, 2015) and geographic segmentation (Berger, 2018) of radical Twitter networks.

1. Research Questions and Methodology

1.1. *Research Questions and Structure*

This paper contributes to this area of research by tackling four levels of enquiry before summing up findings in a final conclusion. First, we briefly describe the state of online participation for far right and Islamist extremism users to determine whether both strands of extremism are active on Twitter in 2018/2019, and if so, whether their ranks are growing.

Then, moving away from observations regarding *whether* something is taking place, a second section identifies *what* is taking place. This part deals with the main ‘repertoires of action’ (Tilly, 2013) - meaning the dominant forms of collective action - for each ideology. Nowadays, civic action is increasingly convergent, combining online and offline activities, and relies on distributed trust across horizontally linked citizens, given that citizens favour collective discussions through horizontal and decentralised networks over claims from a single authoritative information source (Chadwick, 2007; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Figeac et al., 2021). Studying repertoires of action is a way to understand the inherent logics behind media participation for each ideological strand, and characterise the main features of each group - assuming that, and to the extent that, either or both strands create an actual group.

Thirdly, we question whether Twitter offers online resources for radicalisation. We will consider to what extent it is possible to support claims that the Internet harbours radicalisation triggers. In doing so, we tackle questions such as: what makes these forms of digital sociability attractive? What do participants identify with? Who are those setting the tone and driving conversations? These questions informing resources for action find answers through three levels of enquiries pertaining to discussions about influencers, topics and networks of conversation.

Finally, we reflect upon the uses of the expressions “radicalisation” and “political participation.” Radical ideologies are not a set of characteristics, but an interactive process between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic movements, strongly dependent on the context and the situation of the symbolic productions. This section captures how similar phenomena can be framed in different lights to the extent of invalidating one, while downplaying the democratic threats of the other.

1.2. *Target Groups: Personal Accounts from Seven European Countries*

The target groups for this study are accounts, set up by people generally born and raised in seven European countries (Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom), currently experiencing strong radicalisation trends (Figure 1). However, it was not possible to find data for Islamist extremism in Greece and therefore no research was carried out on Islamist extremism in Greece.



Figure 1. *Map of the countries investigated*

Given that the goal was to compare the political engagement of private citizens, only open personal accounts of engaged citizens were selected. Hence, the lack of political leaders, organisations and prominent figures amongst the accounts in our study. The research design called for 50 ‘personal’ accounts for each gender (women, $n=25$; men, $n=25$) per stream of radicalisation, amounting to a total of 100 personal accounts per country.

In respect to GDPR laws, we did not collect sensitive data. In selecting accounts manually during the ethnographic phase of the study, we were cautious to select accounts in which people specified their country of origin.

1.3. *Criteria for the Selection of Accounts*

Accounts were selected through an initial phase of direct observation, i.e. online ethnography (from Sept.-Dec. 2018). 20+ criteria were used to single out accounts (Table 2); accounts had to correspond to at least 5 of these criteria to be considered as relevant to the study.

Table 2. *List of criteria used by researchers to select accounts*

List of criteria		
Anti-immigration Ultra-nationalism Superiority Focus on purity Violence	Authoritarianism (hierarchical structure with a strong leader) Anti-democratic Victimhood (e.g. unjustly	Religious fundamentalism (Catholic, Orthodox or Islamic extremism) Anti-politically

Misogyny Ultra-nationalism Promotion of gender roles Conspiracy	imprisoned) Militaryistic Anti-system Hate speech Salafism Racism	correct Anti-semitism Martyrdom Jihad
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Additional techniques were used, notably: interviews with experts from the field, snowballing, and automated searches based on keywords.

1.4. Research Methods and Composition of the Sample

The mixed-method approach adopted for this study combined digital ethnography and big data techniques and was implemented across 3 phases. During the first phase, from September to December 2018, researchers conducted direct ethnography and collected 712 Twitter accounts. Of these 712 accounts, 116 subsequently became unavailable, leaving 596 accounts in the final database (see Figure 2).

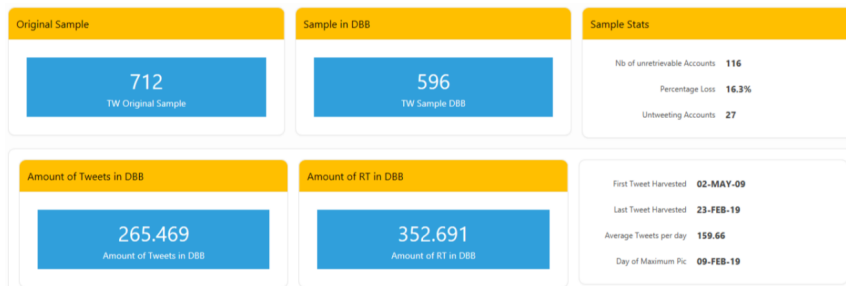


Figure 2. Full sample within the database with numbers of accounts, tweets and retweets

The Twitter pages were scraped as far back as possible, collecting posts from 2 May 2009 to 14 February 2019. While accounts were scraped without a time limit, it is important to point out that the greater part of activity was in the last two years, as the table clearly shows (Figure 3).

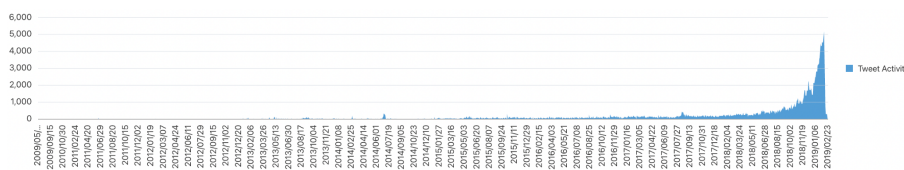


Figure 3. Table of activity of the whole sample over time (from 2010 to 2019)

Phase 2 was a phase dedicated to data retrieval, anonymisation, the creation of a database and the preparation of the collected material for analysis. In addition to anonymisation through automatised processes, all personally identifiable information was removed. Typically, the examples used are translated from the native language into English and rewritten in such a way that the Twitter users could not be identified. The images presented are not taken from the actual Twitter accounts of those in our sample but instead are representative of the same genre and symbolic content as that expressed in their Twitter accounts.

Phase 3 led to the analysis of data sets and observations retrieved during phase 1 and 2. To exploit ethnographic observations and datasets, a mixed method approach was adopted. The approaches employed to analyse the collected material vary and will be systematically specified in each subsection throughout the paper.

2. From Bold Positions to the Lack of Controversial Expression

When we started conducting ethnographic research on Twitter, we immediately identified prevalent differences between the far right and the Islamist extremist samples regarding levels of engagement and presence of extremism. To present this phenomenon in greater detail, we appraise levels of activity and homogeneity within samples by combining qualitative interpretations of ethnographic observations to quantitative interpretations of the timelines of publication and patterns of behaviour. Then, to identify whether activity is scattered or follows a similar pattern, we rely on a quantitative approach of the composition of the sample. Finally, to examine the public expressions of opinions and ponder levels of engagement in extremism, we look at semiotic material of personal accounts (i.e. images, text, memes, banners, gifs) that allow to build collective identity.

2.1. Contrast in Levels of Activity

Our field observations of Twitter allow to assert that far right Twitter activity increased over the period of study, while Islamist extremist Twitter activity was faint. It was easy for researchers to find far right accounts, indifferently for all countries. These accounts were active and presented common characteristics pertaining to a set of signifiers, topics of discussion, people they were interacting with. Yet, there was a lack of activity amongst the Islamist accounts and they could not be grouped in a similar manner.

Numbers pertaining to online activity support this general idea. In the figures below, we can see that the far right is more active on Twitter with nearly 6,000 messages within a month (on the right, Figure 4), while the Islamist extremist activity never surpasses 600 messages in a month (on the left, Figure 5). Speaking of activity in this context refers to tweets and retweets. Furthermore, the far right activity is higher in recent months but non-existent before; activity even spikes in the last months

of the observation. This general upsurge is due to the fact these are very recent accounts, created between 2017 and 2018, and ranks are growing (Figure 4); whereas in the case of Islamist extremism, activity had greatly diminished at the time of the study, leading us to think accounts are rather old and indicative of past tendencies (Figure 5). Our findings fall in line with the literature regarding departure from the platform (Conway et al., 2017).

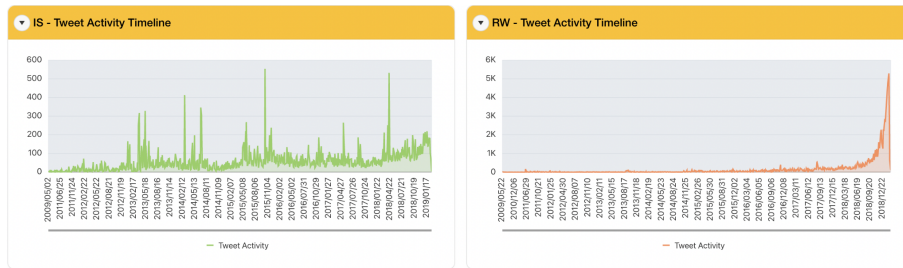


Figure 4 & 5. Twitter timeline of activity for Islamist extremism (on the left) and the far right (on the right)

Another element allows us to defend the idea that the far right is growing in ranks, whereas Islamist extremism activity is a shadow of the past. In the table below, we can see the tweet activity for both ideologies side-by-side; the first half of the graph contains box-plots addressing tweet levels of activity for Islamist extremism; on the second half of the graph are box-plots illustrating tweet levels for the far right (Figure 6). Box plots represent the distribution and the dispersion of a full dataset. The more the rectangle is bottom-skewed, the smaller the activity is; reversely, the more the rectangle is top-skewed, the more activity there is. Dots that appear outside of the rectangle are indicative of activity that is not inline with the rest of the sample.

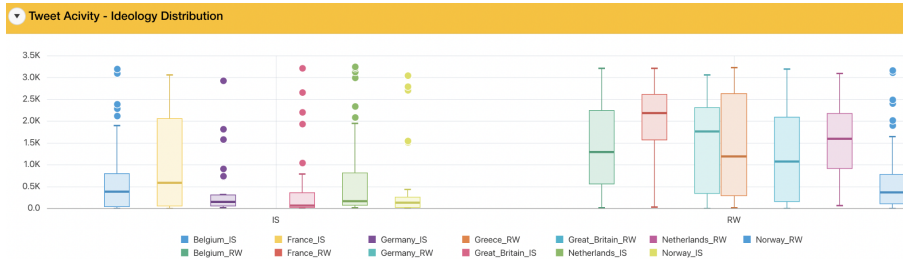


Figure 6. Composition of the samples (distribution and dispersion)

In this figure, we see that in the case of Islamist extremist accounts - and this is true for all countries (with the possible exception of France) - plotboxes are low-skewed,

meaning most individuals have barely published on Twitter, with the exception of some random accounts. Significantly, there is no common behaviour, activity is scattered and lacks uniformity. Contributors appear poorly related to one another. Comparatively, the far right activity seems to be homogeneous, pertaining to common behaviour amongst the users (with the possible exception of accounts within the Norwegian sample that appear to be outside of the scope of a dominant pattern of behaviour). Connectivity seems high.

2.2. Identities Portrayed: Like-minded or Scattered

Let us now further consider engagement in extremism by means of how identities are portrayed by qualitatively appreciating semiotic material of personal accounts.

Throughout Europe, Twitter users' biographies, display of names, and profile pictures on the far right - despite wide variation across individual accounts - are commonly a primary space for endogenous labelling. Labels offer evidence of generalised acceptance of hate speech and a high level of tolerance for radical views and opinions that lays the groundwork for tolerance for extremism. In the UK for example, pictures declare ideological allegiance through the use of prominent neo-Nazi and white-supremacist symbolism, such as the sun cross and the British Union of Fascists flag.

Throughout Europe, the similarly large presence of labels given to those outside of the established in-group aligns with academic theories on the formation of identities and the importance of binaries in establishing group boundaries. External labels and terms such as 'Muslim', 'barbarian', 'Jew', 'rapist', 'attacker' suggest that the perceived threat from the out-group is used to define the identity and position of the in-group. In general, the sample refers to binaries such as 'Christian' and 'Muslim', 'peace' and 'invasion', 'religion' and 'cult'. We can see this same dynamic of 'us vs them' which essentialises relative differences between groups, naturalising qualitative dichotomies from 'sacred' to 'barbaric', 'heritage' to 'genocide', and designating everything on the outside as evil and threatening and everything inside as good, virtuous and desirable. In short, one observes a link-minded posture throughout accounts displaying strong signs of extremism underpinned by multiple forms of far right expressions. There are preliminary signs of violent extremism.

Comparatively, the performed identities of the Islamist extremist sample are diverse in composition. There is considerable variation in the expression of religious opinions as much throughout Europe as within the countries of the same sample. In certain countries, notably Germany, Norway and the UK, we found random accounts displaying signs of support for jihadist-Salafism. The vast majority of the accounts however, all countries alike, predominantly supported Salafi purism, with the notable exception of the UK.

Purist Salafism is exhibited as much in Twitter users' biographies, display of names, and profile pictures as in messages. Quietist Salafism is not indicative of

engagement in processes of radicalisation and defence of violent extremism (Wiktorowicz, 2006), as purists focus on non-violent methods of propagation, purification and education. Only closer consideration of messages could allow us to demonstrate engagement in violent extremism.

2.3. *The Forms of Expression: From Ostentatious to Lack of Expression of Opinions*

One criterion for selecting the sample was the direct or indirect call for violence. In the case of the far right, it is easy to find numerous accounts that fit the criteria, either explicitly or implicitly shared violent content targeting minorities or immigrants. We found that violent intent is often expressed and hate speech is an integral part of digital conversations. For example, in France, it was easy to spot the following type of imagery and texts that openly stigmatise immigrants and/or expressed radical opinions in terms of how to treat immigrants and Muslims in particular (Images 1, 2).



Image 1.

The user states: *“May I present to you the future classmates of your children.”* Underneath this claim, there is a video, excerpt from an ISIS propaganda video, with a toddler killing a man on his knees at bullet point.



Image 2.

“We come in peace”

Likewise, in Greece, tweets offer similar content (Images 3-5).

We even found explicit calls to kill in Norway, as in the following tweet: *“Cannot be integrated. Kill all of those who do not go home. Bomb women and children #visomstøtterlisthaug#frp.”*

As for the Islamist sample, we did not find enough accounts that openly supported or encouraged violence, to allow us to keep this as the main criterion of selection

(again with the exception of the UK). In very rare cases, there is direct support for martyrdom, for instance, reflected in the image below (Image 6) found in the Dutch sample and the associated quote by Azzam, one of the most influential jihadi ideologues, sometimes wrongfully rumoured to be the founder of the predecessor of Al-Qaeda.



Image 3. An illustration of how an Islamist invasion of European countries is spreading chaos and destruction



Image 4. An illustration of Islam bringing humanity to the ground



Image 5. A picture illustrating the threat the Islamic State poses to (Christian) women. On the picture, one can read: “(...) *this young lady is being sold into sexual slavery as a child bride (...)*.”

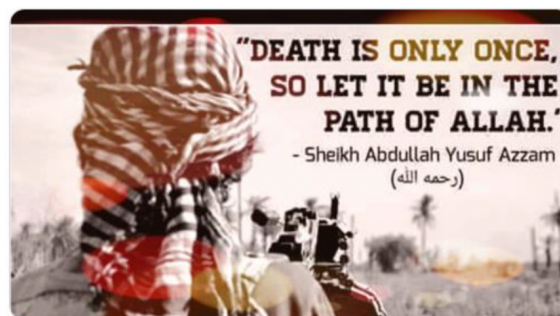


Image 6. Direct support for martyrdom

Some of the tweeters also show very explicit videos or photos of the mistreatment of Muslims in the world. Below is a screenshot of a video (Image 7) showing how the Rohingya are burnt alive, and even dragged into the fire, taken from the Dutch sample.



Image 7. Screenshot of a video of a Rohingya being burnt alive

However, the contrast between both ideological strands in expressing violent intent or violent material is striking: participation on the far right showcases violent content, some of which could be assimilated to calls for violence, whereas Islamist extremists' participation offers very little to no explicit reference to, nor expresses support for, Islamist extremism.

3. Repertoires of Action: From Activism to Digital Marketing

Digital tools, by providing means to engage in political action for change, allow private citizens to take their grievances, concerns, beliefs, and ideals into their own hands and facilitate collective action (Norris, 2002). Here, in a second section of results, we define the manners in which each sample participates online by means of a repertoire of action and identify the main features distinguishing these forms of collective action. We do so by focusing on how users from the sample engage online and what justifications they provide to explain their contribution.

3.1. Far Right: Engaging in Media Activism to Support a Cause

On the far right, contributors use Twitter to express their political opinions and promote their ideological views in the public sphere. Users engage in a classical form of media activism, consolidated around five main features:

i) Anti-Islam/anti-immigration

Twitter is used for political ends to engage in a 'cause', that of combatting Islam and immigration in Europe. Anti-immigration and anti-Islam discourses are abundant and at the core of participation. In Germany, people discuss how Europe is committing

suicide through its immigration and refugee policies. In Belgium, users post explicit images. In the first example below, we can see a man saying something in Arabic and a woman asking “what” in English. The response to her question appears to be physical brutality and an imposed head scarf (Image 8). In the next image, the captions reads “kids’ daycare” with the picture showing a ticking timebomb in the hands of a Muslim man (Image 9).



Image 8. *An illustration of Islam as a husband beater*



Image 9. *An illustration of Islam as a ticking time bomb*

In an example from the Dutch sample, the prospect of Sharia Law - as the future of The Netherlands - is portrayed as a threat in an image meant to alarm followers (Image 10). The text associated with this image reads: “These are only the “incidents” that make the news. The reality is much worse. Not everybody reports to the police after being beaten. As a victim, you are perceived as the perpetrator.”



Image 10. *A picture used to support the idea Islam is a threat*

ii) Identity under threat

There is an excessive focus on depicting collective identity under threat, with violations and injustices described as structural rather than incidental. A common theme concerns the sentiment that a constructed national culture is threatened by immigration in general and Islam in particular. This is expressed in the following

picture with the header '*changing Netherlands*' in Dutch (Image 11). We see how the population has changed to wearing headscarves in 2017 and to being mostly immigrants.



Image 11. Picture illustrating '*changing Netherlands*'

Perceived threats pertaining to immigration, 'Islamisation', and the gradual devaluation and disappearance of national culture and identity are reflected in an obsession with crimes committed by immigrants and Jihadist terrorist attacks. In the UK, references to rape, grooming and Rotherham (referring to the Rotherham child sexual exploitation case) are numerous. Similarly, terms that refer to terrorist attacks in London, Paris, and Manchester, which are synonymised with their 'Muslim' attackers, are used as examples of the dangers of immigration and the incompatibility between Islam and 'Western' values.

iii) National history, culture or religion are considered as the basis for a new societal order

The flip side of these threats is the emergence of a new horizon composed of national glory, cultural unity and religious uniformity. Media engagement is meant to restore past greatness.

Part of the far right sample claims to defend a socially constructed 'heritage', one of Christianity, white-skinned people who share an identical historical background. This translates into pushing forward (ultra)nationalism and patriotism. For many

countries, this means using flags to present themselves. In Greece, accounts showcase the flag of the Byzantine Empire with the double-headed eagle as well as one with a Christian cross, offering symbols of past glorious empires and Christianity. In the Netherlands, a Dutch variation of the national flag is shown containing the acronym NL4NL, which refers to “the Netherlands for the Dutch.” In the UK, Norway, Greece, France and Germany, Celtic crosses are employed (Image 12), given the narrative context, as white power/pro-Aryan movement symbols (Miller Idriss, 2017) and support for Stormfront (an online community of white nationalists) (Image 13).



Image 12. *Images of The Celtic cross*



Image 13. *Image Logo of Stormfront*

Also, we note a number of references to the relation between people’s skin colour and belonging to the nation. For example, in the Norwegian sample, there are historical images of national costumes with Nazi symbols, Vikings, Norwegian nature and the Nordic Resistance Movement’s flag (Image 14).



Image 14. *Soldiers in brown military uniforms*

iv) Decline of institutions

The fourth feature is based on a ‘re-information’ strategy (Jammet & Guidi, 2017). To properly understand the implications behind this communicative strategy, one must consider a broader common conception within the far right sample: the State,

the educational system and the media contribute to, or fail to, address the threats mentioned hereinabove. Given the failure of these traditional institutions, users take it upon themselves to inform others, with ‘adequate’ news sources to counter ‘fake’ news from the corrupted mainstream media.

Domain	NbLinks
twitter.com	25096
www.fdesouche.com	4297
youtu.be	1864
www.adoxa.info	1338
francais.rt.com	1315
www.lefigaro.fr	1179
www.valeursactuelles.com	949
www.leparisien.fr	708
www.bvoltage.fr	706
www.bfmtv.com	679
actu17.fr	614
www.lemonde.fr	537
fr.sputniknews.com	512

Figure 7. *The most shared domains in tweets*

In France, as we can see in the tab summarising the most shared domains in tweets, the most common news sources in tweets are those of well-known far right online news sources (Figure 7).

v) Level of radicalism is extraordinary

The political nature of this format of participation is different from ‘ordinary’ political stances insofar as the level of radicalism is high; this repertoire openly stigmatises minorities and can be a vehicle for the expression of violent content as we have already established. It is not a form of clicktivism or slacktivism as sometimes described in literature, but instead, a strong claim to intervene in everyday politics and act offline, at the very least, during election times.

3.2. Islamist Extremism: Storefront to Promote a Brand of Faith

The Islamist extremist accounts are employed in an outbound manner to broadcast religious ideological material. They focus on preaching, religious lifestyle tips, scriptures and sermons pertaining to a Muslim way of life. This does not fully

eliminate the activist dimension of this repertoire of action, nor does it negate its extremist nature. Simply, this repertoire serves primarily to publicise religious beliefs.

We must mention the fact that accounts may fit only one of the characteristics outlined below. With that being said, there are five main features:

i) Quietist Salafism

Posts are predominantly representative of quietist Salafism as we have established hereinabove.

ii) Preaching, delivering faith-oriented lifestyle tips and broadcasting religious scriptures

This repertoire is centred around preaching and sharing religious lifestyle tips, scriptures and sermons pertaining to a Muslim way of life. Typically, we can spot messages in the image header of personal pages. For example, one header from the UK reads: 'The Salif should strive to walk in the footsteps of the salaf as Salih'. Within conversations, much talk is about how to lead a good life by following the Prophet. Terms refer to phrases and concepts familiar to Muslims, including terms such as 'Koran', 'Qur'an', 'Allah', 'recite', 'pray', 'angel', 'mercy', 'deen' (religion), 'dua' (supplication to Allah), 'the prophet Muhammad', 'prophetic hadith' (the prophetic sayings and teachings of the Prophet) and 'God'.

Accounts can promote their own interpretation of faith and create enough of an online audience to become an influencer. Typically, such influencers within the Islamist Belgian sample, for example, offer day-to-day lifestyle tips, publish self-reflective or inspirational blog posts, summed up in a single quote, and present organisational advice on how to stay committed or reach personal development goals in relation to faith (Images 15-17). These accounts can represent lone individuals (aka influencers) or brands related to specific Mosques and schools of faith.

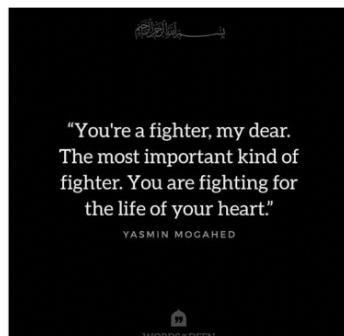


Image 15. Motivational quote



Image 16. Motivational quote

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَا لَكُمْ إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ انْفِرُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ
 أَنْتُمْ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ - أَرْضَيْتُمْ بِالْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا مِنَ الْآخِرَةِ - فَمَا
 مَتَاعَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا فِي الْآخِرَةِ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ

"O you who have believed, what is [the matter] with you that, when you are told to go forth in the cause of Allah , you adhere heavily to the earth? Are you satisfied with the life of this world rather than the Hereafter? But what is the enjoyment of worldly life compared to the Hereafter except a [very] little." (9:38)

Image 17. Excerpt from the Koran

iii) Twitter is exploited as a storefront that re-routes users to other online platforms

The third feature of this repertoire is related to the fact that Twitter is exploited as a storefront that re-routes users to other online platforms, such as chat rooms where conversations can take place, storage spaces where files can be retrieved, crowdfunding sites where money can be collected, or more commonly, blogs with information on branches of faith in relation to local Mosques.

We note examples of schools using Twitter to promote religious scriptures and sermons with the clear intention of showcasing what they do locally, thus using Twitter as a platform to generate an audience and bring attention to their activities, as is the case in France. In the first example below, a local Mosque promotes a previous speaking event (Image 18); in the next example, the tweet shares information about a series of conferences (Image 19). The last message pertains to religious teachings of a spiritual leader (Image 20).

1) Last night there was a blessed gathering at the house of Sh Muhammad al-Aqeel #Madrasi. Sh Muhammad bin Hadi gave a pertinent lecture to Ahius Sunnah, may Allah reward him with good. From those present, Sh Abdur-Rahman Mohideen, Sh Osama Al-Otaibi and many students of knowledge



Image 18. Local Mosque promoting a speaking event

Here's the Summer Conference Schedule:

SALAF PUBLICATIONS - SUMMER CONFERENCE 2019	
THE SALAFI MASJID, WRIGHT STREET, BIRMINGHAM, B10 9SP	
"Madrasi, Spilling of the Unquenchable & the Methodology of the Teachers of Hadith"	
FRIDAY 19TH JULY 2019	
13:30	Khutbah by Shaykh Salim Bamhriz. Shaykh Salim Bamhriz
17:00	Advice of al-'Allamah Zaid bin Hadi Rahmahullah for the Student in Remaining Upright & Grounded. Abu Muzah Taqweem
18:15	Shaykh Salim Bamhriz Live in Person. Shaykh Salim Bamhriz
20:30	The Hadith: "My Ummah will split into 73 sects..." Abdullah Lahmani
SATURDAY 20TH JULY 2019	

Image 19. Promotion of a series of upcoming conferences



Image 20. Religious teachings of a spiritual leader

In this sense, microblogging to promote ideologically-oriented faith material is a means to build an audience in order to pursue notoriety as a digital influencer. They may also sell associated products (e.g. books, speaking events, tours). This repertoire of action can be related to ‘educational entrepreneurs’, i.e. a new ‘offer’ - one consisting of tweets, YouTube videos, blog posts - based on ‘traditional’ material, typically classical religious material (Van Praet, 2018).

iv) Users take public stands to denounce terrorism and acts of violence

If we did spot a handful of accounts promoting jihadi-type material throughout Europe, the general tendency is that users do not condone violence, quite the contrary: they take public stands to denounce terrorism and acts of violence. Contributors argue against terrorism or radical forms of political Islam. They denounce infamous political figures or organisations supporting radical Islamism by providing links to anti-extremism leaflets or arguing against the reasoning behind terrorism, explaining how such activities are misguided and go against Islam. This phenomenon is noticeable in a tweet claiming “Khalid Yasin” - a well-known controversial British Salafist preacher - is misguided. As stated in the tweet from the UK, his preachings go against an “authentic” version of the Islamic faith:

“Several testimonies in this article serve to demonstrate the fallacious nature of Khalid Yasin, along with the fact his preachings are dangerous.”

Another tweet openly warns against Al-Qaeda and ISIS organisations by linking to an educational leaflet explaining why these groups must be avoided:

“Get your new leaflet now: Warnings against terrorist activities of ISIS & Al-Qaeda”

In a final example, we can see in the “about” section of a user’s profile that the contributor adopts the opposite position to one of violence, by portraying Islam as a

religion of peace:

“Allah calls for the Home of Peace and guides whom he wishes to the righteous path.”

v) This repertoire is one of religious fundamentalism dabbling in political extremism

The last feature situates this repertoire of action within the range of political extremism and slightly contradicts the fourth feature. Signs of religious fundamentalism exclude the possibility of considering this repertoire as apolitical and exempt from any sort of extremism or political consideration. In this respect, we can qualify this repertoire as one of religious fundamentalism dabbling in political extremism.

4. Resources for Action

To further our understanding of the role of social media in the engagement in radical causes, we now discuss the resources for action. We see that there is little to no matter for discussion of resources for action for Islamist extremism, apart from out-of-the ordinary ISIS type activity. On the far right, however, we demonstrate that group identity paves the way to radicalisation, knowing that group identity is supported by world leaders and related to a global conversation.

4.1. Pro-ISIS vs. anti-ISIS Online Power Struggle: A Doorway into ISIS Propaganda Material?

Direct observation over several months led to witnessing bot-related operations opposing pro-ISIS and anti-ISIS accounts. These accounts are of a different nature than the ones we set out to study in this paper as they pertain to highly-technical operations related to a digital war between audiences and counter-audiences. Lively and very active online groups – part of the greater ecosystem of what is happening on Twitter and more generally illustrative of contemporary trends on the web – fuelled by a power struggle opposing pro-ISIS accounts to a global army of anti-ISIS users, takes place on a day-to-day basis. Pop-up accounts attempt to create holes in censorship, knowing that accounts will be deleted within hours, at best days (Image 21). These accounts are ostensibly supportive of ISIS. They contain links to other websites on which one can find official propaganda-type material (access to official ISIS journals, like issues of Rumiya). On the other hand, there are private citizens (a.k.a. ‘hunters’), without a united political front, who actively moderate social media websites (Image 22). This power struggle is tied to the use of online bots and automatic tracking systems. ‘Hunters’ act as gatekeepers and safeguards of the web, by tracking and flagging ISIS-type content, to get deviant accounts taken down by the Commercial Content Moderation workers, i.e. workers responsible for judging what is acceptable and what should be removed.



Image 21. Example of a pop-up account



Image 22. Example of a tracker account

Even though the ISIS-type accounts exemplify how radicalisation is supported by social-technical means, they are out of scope of the samples. It is impossible to know who is behind these publications, whether we were dealing with private citizens, fan boys or girls, leaders of opinion or actual members of ISIS. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that such trends exist on Twitter. Of equal importance, the links shared in the pop-up accounts are means for radicalisation.

However, on the Islamist extremist end of the spectrum, means for radicalisation stop there. Our focus will therefore be on what takes place on the far right from this point.

4.2. How the Far Right uses of Twitter paves the Way for Radicalisation

Here, we will see that radicalisation is favoured by media participation in three ways: 1) influencers 2) topics of conversations 3) networks of conversation.

i) Influencers: an endorsement for far-right ideologies

Influencers play a crucial role in persuading others (Berry, Keller 2003). Studying influence patterns is therefore meant to pinpoint which individuals shape conversations and impact public debates in Europe through their popularity in digital threads. What we apprehend as influencers is the quantitative consideration of influentiality, established by measuring a ratio between followers/follow and responses to original tweets (Cha et al. 2010).

Research shows a small number of highly visible political leaders (Figure 8). Trump, but also Bolsonaro, Salvini and Farage, have had a considerable impact on the debates. They are not ranked according to their level of approval; their influence derives from how much noise they generate in the public sphere, or how much attention they garner in public debates. The most influential Twitter user from our data in all the countries was, by far, former President Donald Trump. The impact of Trump is likely due to a combination of factors including his expansive follower base, regular activity, controversial tweets and large presence of bots associated with his account. Without in-depth analysis of tweets that resonated and the nature of replies,

it is impossible to say confidently how these factors contributed and exactly how Trump has influenced the activity of our sample.

In Greece, the top fifteen influencers include: the British far right digital influencer Paul Joseph Watson (cf. Prison Planet); the US extreme-right wing, celebrity-actor James Woods; Voice of Europe, a now banned alternative news-outlet, broadcasting far-right ideologies; the far-right British vlogger, Peter Sweden; the right-wing extremist Italian party, Lega Nord; the (then) Minister of the Interior, Salvini; the official account of the US White House; Trump’s wife, Melania; the Brazilian President, Bolsonaro; Netanyahu, the prime minister of Israel; and Adonis Georgiadis, an openly anti-leftist and anti-communist Greek politician, well-known for his anti-Semitic views. Detailing the Greek case allows us to exemplify the fact that top influencers are transnational figures, well-known for their far right positions; concerns are not nationally bound but expressed within a far-right digital circle. The uniformity of such figures presupposes the existence of a European far right ‘milieu’. The term milieu is understood as a space where radical/extreme messages are encountered online via people who participate in radical/extreme activities.

LIST OF THE TOP-15 INTERNATIONAL RWE INFLUENCERS							
	Belgium	France	Germany	UK	Greece	Norway	The Netherlands
Donald Trump	No. 1	No. 1	No. 1	No. 1	No. 1	No. 1	No. 1
James Woods	No. 2		No. 2	No. 2	No. 8	No. 3	No. 3
Voice of Europe	No. 4		No. 5		No. 3	No. 5	No. 4
Prison Planet, Joseph Watson	No. 11			No. 4	No. 7	No. 6	No. 7
Matteo Salvini		No. 4	No. 10		No. 4		
Nigel Farage	No. 8			No. 7			No. 10
Peter Sweden	No. 7				No. 9	No. 10	
Donald Trump, Jr.				No. 3		No. 7	No. 6
Charlie Kirk				No. 5		No. 4	
Melania Trump	No. 5					No. 8	
Jair Bolsonaro		No. 3			No. 10		
Ann Coulter				No. 6		No. 9	
The White House					No. 5		No. 9
Marie le Pen		No. 2					
Jim Jordan						No. 2	
Barack Obama				No. 8			
Jean Messiha		No. 5					
Damien Rieu		No. 6					

Figure 8. List of top influencers per country

What is also important to emphasise is that those who could be potentially contributing to online radicalisation can be well-known world leaders, not simply obscure organisations, underground digital influences or online gurus. When the needle of the boundaries of what is acceptable to say in the public sphere is moved by legitimate figures, the work of moderators operating to restrict extremism is put to the test and democracy with it.

ii) Narratives federating people and creating a sense of togetherness

If we turn to conversations, we can spot narratives uniting people. To demonstrate this we examined the tweets and retweets by means of an automatic statistical lexical analysis and then compared the main themes for each country. The method used is based on a descending hierarchical classification; this operation was carried out through a factorial analysis of correspondences. To complete this analysis, we used the Reinert method (Reinert, 1983, 1990) implemented in the free software IRaMuTeQ (Ratinaud, 2014). Below is an example of this type of analysis, taken from the Belgian sample (Figure 9). The results - presented in a dendrogramme - offer a segmentation of the online conversations into clusters, underlining the main lexical themes of the corpus. Information on the size of each cluster and the overrepresented lexicon in each cluster also appears.

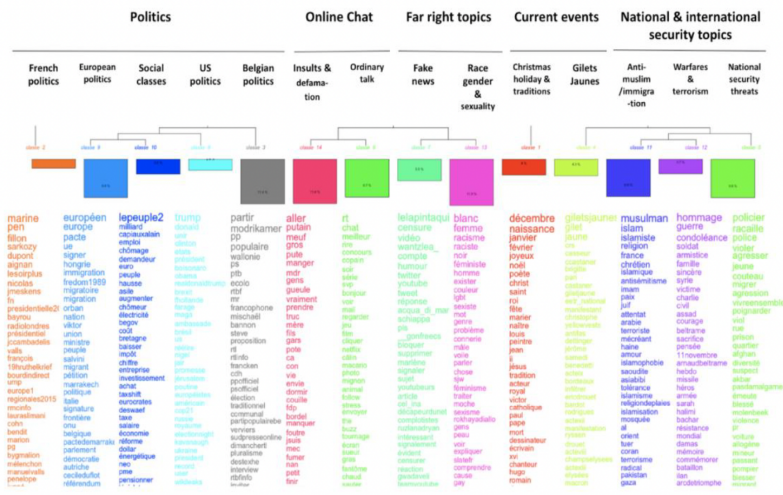


Figure 9. Dendrogramme for the far right Belgian sample

In comparing the individual samples of the seven countries, evidence shows that conversations are global. The main themes go back to what was discussed in the section on repertoires of action. They deal with anti-immigration and anti-Islam; strong leaders and far right unity in the West; anti-establishment and anti-Europe discourses. There is excessive focus on depicting collective identity under threat.

Perceived threats pertain to immigration, ‘Islamisation’, and the gradual devaluation and disappearance of national culture and identity. The State, the educational system and the media are perceived as a single entity (a.k.a. ‘the establishment’), failing to address the threats. Representatives of the perceived current ruling class are mocked and derided via caricature and hate speech, most notably political leaders, judges and media figures. These ‘anti’ features are similar to the characteristics of the alt-right movement described by VOX-Pol in a report describing the Twitter activities of this movement (Berger, 2018). Failures are seen as due to dilution of national political authority, EU membership, and political correctness in media and education that blindly promote equality regardless of differences. Together, this appears as a concerted effort by left-wing politicians, mainstream media, and the educational system to cover the true extent of the threat posed by immigration and Islam. This global conversation revolves around national history, culture or religion; such matters are considered as the basis for a new societal order. Many references to historical national heroes and images of a glorious national or European past are made, underlining the perceived (sometimes racial) purity that existed and is currently threatened. All these topics dip into double standards, victimhood and unfair treatment sentiments, and highlight identity issues.

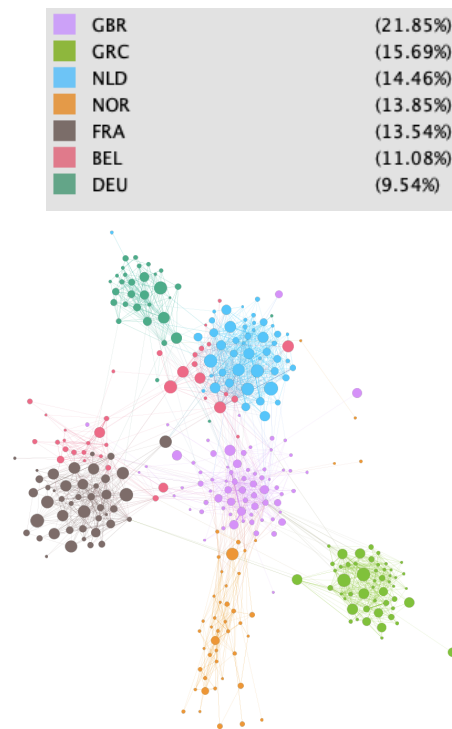
The fact conversations were global on the far right leads us to support the idea that the consolidation of nationalist and conservative positions are nowadays being forged on an international scale. There is probably some sense of unity that goes beyond national contexts, supporting evidence of an online digital far-right milieu at the European level.

iii) A far-right milieu related to a global conversation

Network analyses for the seven countries completes our understanding of how Twitter offers resources to engage in processes of radicalisation in Europe. Examining what is taking place from a network perspective helps capture how samples are structured, how people are linked to one another and how conversations flow. To conduct this analysis, we isolated user information pertaining to followers and followees, as well as streams of tweets and retweets, then used Gephi to design connectivity of users and conversations.

Research showed close-knit networks of contributors frequently sharing information, liking or retweeting each other’s messages. Each country - corresponding to a given colour (Figure 10) - is well-established as a national community, being gathered with little to no peripheral accounts/dots, implying homogeneity within the network and strong connectivity. There are two notable exceptions: Belgium, that is distributed between two linguistic areas - one French/France, the other Dutch/the Netherlands - as well as Norway, scattered and far from the network of other countries, implying that the sample is not well-established. Moreover, all country-level clusters are well-connected to one another, with several connections from one cluster to the next, with the UK at the centre (likely due to the linguistic dimension of

conversations). High levels of interconnectivity and circulation of content as well as conversations further establish the existence of a far-right European milieu. This milieu is not restricted to national considerations, although some countries have more leverage than others within this far right European milieu. Communicative networks are simultaneously homogeneous at the national level but also well-connected at the European level.



Figures 10 & 11. *Interconnectivity of the Twitter sample by country*

Another approach to our sample confirms homophily and the existence of global conversations (Figure 11). Below we can see the same samples but organised in terms of communities of interpretation (Figure 12). Communities of interpretations are networks of users who share interests in the same topic. We can see very little dispersion and extremely strong connectivity within samples around a few main themes. The level of homophily appears to be quite extraordinary, especially given the size of the sample, as it is organised only around five threads, further confirming the existence of a global conversation related to an European far-right digital milieu. The structuration of conversation around interpretative communities also emphasises the fact that this milieu on Twitter is a European closed-circle, with little outside connection, and a strong bubble-filter effect.

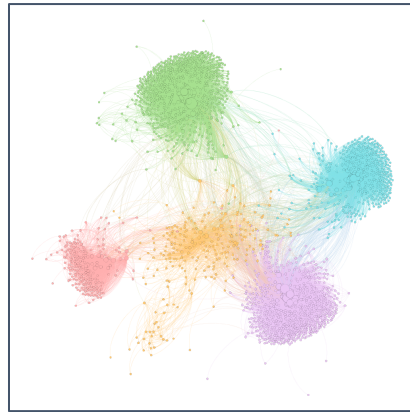


Figure 12. *Network of right-wing extremists on Twitter: our sample for all 7 countries and their followers that they follow*

These elements allow us to demonstrate the existence of a far-right European milieu thriving on Twitter that supports online radicalisation for those who wish to engage in such ideologies through their media participation.

5. Discussion: Participation vs. Radicalisation

Throughout the paper we have seen the disparities between the two ideological beliefs. Their singularities notwithstanding, we saw that one phenomenon is a shadow of the past, whereas the other is related to an active base of members, embedded in extremism, related to a European milieu. The reasons behind this disparity are difficult to single out since it is most likely a mix of several convergent phenomena.

We know that Islamist extremism still exists but that ISIS-type activity, for example, takes place elsewhere. ISIS has encouraged its followers on social media sites to connect with ISIS coordinators and recruiters on Telegram to discuss sensitive matters such as travel to ISIS-held territory. ISIS also created public channels on Telegram to broadcast pro-ISIS news updates and disseminate other propaganda materials through its Amaq News Agency news outlet. In January 2015, an ISIS-affiliated channel disseminated a guide of the ‘safest’ platforms to use (Helm et al., 2020; Coker et al., 2015) (Figure 12).



Figure 12. A guide of platforms disseminated by ISIS in 2015

Twitter and Facebook are noticeably absent - indicative of jihadist audiences' apprehension towards using public platforms. More recently, sites like Telegram announced that they are 'clamping down' on jihadist-affiliated accounts and pledging to remove ISIS accounts from public channels (Helm et al., 2020). However, owing to Telegram's encrypted nature, private jihadist groups are still widespread in many different languages on the platform.

Moderation is a strong factor shaping online communities and laying the groundwork for far right milieus as much as the lack of a jihadist milieu on social media. In recent years, websites have received immense pressure from governments and associated agencies to moderate extremist and terrorist-type content. Early on, the Obama Administration and the U.S. Congress formulated legislative proposals. The European Union in the form of a 'code of conduct' incited action. The UK, France and Germany attempted moderation, mainly threatening to fine big tech platforms (Cope et al., 2017). Europol's EU Internet Referral Unit (IRU), in partnership with the Netherlands and Belgium, launched a project² to improve the detection, analysis and referral of online terrorist content. Likewise, a UK-French joint anti-terrorist campaign was created to add pressure on companies like Twitter to improve the monitoring of terrorist-related activities (Toor, 2017). In all these cases, top-down moderation prioritarily aims at Islamist extremism content. Recently, far right activities have started to be more heavily moderated, but by no standards to the same degree (Bodo, 2017; Wahlstrom & Tornberg, 2019).

²

<https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/europol%E2%80%99s-eu-internet-referral-unit-partners-belgium-france-and-netherlands-to-tackle-online-terrorist-content>

Beyond the reasons cited above, another element explaining disparity between the two is the political scene in Western countries. The far right sample is subjected to the blurred boundaries of the permissible, at a time when policing hate speech by right-wing extremism has grown more and more difficult given the support it receives daily with certain political figures in several Western countries, who openly express violent extremist viewpoints (Berger, 2018).

Finally, we can postulate that academia contributes to this situation by using the notions of political participation and radicalisation discriminately. In literature, the expression 'radicalisation' is more often applied to characterise Islamist extremism, whereas 'political participation' is more often employed to study the far right's activities (Pisoui & Reem 2016), even though each ideological strand can refer to a same phenomenon of extremism. This disparity is even more striking given that radicalisation refers to an extreme behaviour, while political participation tells us nothing of the nature of the behaviour. By using the terms radicalisation and political participation discriminately, academia creates legitimacy for one while stigmatising the other. In this article, we have contributed to the labelling of behaviours, even more so in considering both samples from the same viewpoint. Our findings show that the far right is the by-product of internal and external labelling processes, whereas the labelling of Islamist extremist content as radical is more a byproduct of researchers' work and labelling from other institutions (States, Twitter, etc.). In the frame of our own work, we often labelled accounts Islamist extremist even though we were dealing with forms of Purist Salafism that arguably could be framed as conservative rather than extremist, and therefore participating in the stigmatisation of one ideology over the other.

Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed far right and Islamist extremism in Europe, based on media participation on Twitter between 2018-2019 to understand the role of social media in the process of engagement in radical causes. We focused on three main areas: online activity, forms of collective action, and digital resources for engagement in a radical cause. In a final section, we carried out a discussion on how the discriminate use of notions of political participation and radicalisation for each ideology supports each form of media participation.

In the first section, we saw that far right Twitter activity increased over the period of the study. Accounts were active, presented common characteristics pertaining to a set of signifiers and people with whom they were interacting. Publications displayed acceptance of hate speech and a high level of tolerance for extremism. Comparatively, Islamist extremist accounts' activity was faint. If accounts predominately supported Salafi purism, the performed identities of the sample were diverse in composition. This sample appears to have been incapacitated in expressing controversial ideas.

Moving forward, we discussed the main repertoires of action. We showed that the far right uses Twitter to converse, employing the platform for its democratic conversational properties, taking advantage of the fact that this digital space provides a direct access to one of the main arenas of public debate that exists in modern times, to defend a 'cause'; whereas the Islamist extremist sample uses the platform as a storefront to broadcast its ideological beliefs, seeking recognition and publicity, to promote leaders and faith-based brands, and at times, to route users to other platforms where sales can sometimes be performed.

Next, we examined resources for action available for online users. We saw that there is little to no matter for discussion of resources for action for Islamist extremism, apart from out-of-the ordinary ISIS type activity. On the far right, however, we demonstrated that group identity paves the way to radicalisation, knowing that group identity is fuelled by world leaders and related to a global conversation. The fact that conversations were global on the far right leads us to support the idea that the consolidation of nationalist and conservative positions is nowadays being forged on an international scale. There is a sense of unity that goes beyond national contexts, supporting evidence of an online digital far-right milieu at the European level, knowing some countries have more leverage than others within this far right European milieu. Network analysis, in particular, offers evidence of a close-knit European network of contributors, that has little outside connection, and is subjugated to a strong bubble-filter effect. High levels of interconnectivity, circulation of content as well as conversations within a far-right European milieu show one of the main resources for radicalisation online.

In a final section of this paper, we consider other reasons behind the disparities of media participation for each ideological belief. We show how political participation is constructed at the crossroads of conflicting dynamics on the web, beyond their offline existence. Moderation is a strong factor shaping online communities, laying the groundwork for a far right milieu as much as the lack of a jihadist milieu on social media. Beyond this, the political scene in Western countries plays a major role. The far right sample is subjected to the blurred boundaries of the permissible, at a time when policing hate speech by the far right has become more and more difficult given the support it receives daily in most Western countries. Comparatively, controversial forms of expression related to Islamist extremism have been banned on big tech platforms. The contrast between the two forms of political practices is also related to the ways in which academia uses the notions of political participation and radicalisation discriminately. The important element to keep in mind here is that labelling has a performative effect; the treatment of these two ideological beliefs is asymmetric, whether this treatment is by academia, big tech or governments. Yet, by singling out the one, without giving the second the same level of attention, the most dangerous form of extremism of the two may possibly be left unattended. The asymmetric treatment of these ideological beliefs raises indeed the question of how social media is nowadays playing the game of extremism, helping legitimise political leaders outside of traditional national spheres, paving the way to a European far right

milieu in a new territory foreign to past democratic rules and settings tied to gatekeepers and legitimate institutions.

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