



CRIS
Centre for Resilient
and Inclusive Societies



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THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN AUSTRALIA'S POLITICAL FRINGES ON THE RIGHT AND LEFT

ONLINE MESSAGING ON FACEBOOK

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

This paper is the first in a series analysing the interplay between far-right and far-left groups in the state of Victoria, Australia, across a range of social media platforms. This series is produced by the Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies through the Centre's research and program Stream 4 'Dynamics of Violent Extremism'. Stream 4 is a collaboration between researchers at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and the Institute for Sustainable Industries & Liveable Cities at Victoria University.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research briefing outlines findings from an analysis of the far-right and far-left Facebook ecosystem in Australia in the first seven months of 2020. It analyses how the far-right and far-left discuss each other on Facebook and how narratives about the other side of the political spectrum shape the online activity of these groups. It also seeks to understand how central discussion about the 'other side' is to the far-right and far-left and how it fits within the broader online activities of these movements. The analysis was conducted between 1 January and 31 July 2020 and looked at 43 far-right and 31 far-left Facebook pages, as well as seven far-right and two far-left public groups (see Methodology below for details).

KEY FINDINGS

The volume of output on far-right and far-left Facebook pages and by groups remained relatively consistent during the period of study, but with a notable increase in June, coinciding with worldwide anti-racist protests and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The far-right's discussion of the far-left increased sharply during that period, as did discussion of the far-right by the far-left. The simultaneous increase in mentions about the other side of the political spectrum shows that the events of June–July 2020 led to increased antagonistic mobilisation online.

Discussion about the far-left accounted for 7% of the output of far-right pages and groups over the research period, while discussion about the far-right accounted for 17% of the output of far-left pages. This suggests opposition to the far-right is more central to far-left discussions than opposition to the far-left is to the far-right in the online space in Australia.

A limited number of far-right and far-left pages accounted for most content produced about the other side of the political spectrum. This suggests that, while reciprocal far-left and far-right activity online is present across different groups, this content is mainly driven by a small array of particularly active pages.

Discussions about COVID-19 increased significantly across the far-right and far-left in March–April, although the ideological focus was radically opposed. While content of far-right pages and by groups blamed China for the spread of the virus and expressed support for border closures, the content of far-left pages and by groups focused on the impact of the pandemic on workers' rights and the economy.

China was a rallying topic for the far-right and represented a key theme on far-right pages and far-right groups, with popular posts expressing hostility towards China and Chinese people. Increased discussion about China coincided with a rise in cases of COVID-19 in Europe and President Trump's description of COVID-19 as a 'foreign' and 'Chinese' virus.¹ Discussion about COVID-19 also led to anti-minority mobilisation on far-right pages, including anti-Muslim narratives, showing that international events were weaponised by the far-right to promote exclusionary agendas.

Discussion about the left and the BLM movement increased sharply in far-right groups at a time when protests against institutional racism spread internationally. The Australian far-right's interest in BLM protests in the US reflects a broader and increasingly studied trend of internationalisation of the far-right,² whereby nationalist groups draw on international events to support their agendas and build relationships with far-right groups in other countries. Popular posts on far-right pages attempted to discredit BLM and depict the movement as violent.

The BLM movement was also central to the discussion among far-left groups through the lens of police violence. Discussion of police violence increased sharply in June in response to the BLM protests, with popular posts documenting police brutality against protesters and minorities in Australia and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

This research briefing outlines findings from an analysis of the far-right and far-left Facebook ecosystem in Australia between January and July 2020. It examines how the far-right and far-left discuss each other on Facebook and identifies the topics of conversation which are most salient to both groups, reflecting in particular on how the far-right and far-left reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic and the global revival of anti-racism BLM protests in June.

This briefing looks at pages and groups that meet an established definition of the far-right and far-left (see Glossary). It does not aim to draw any equivalences between the ideologies or actions of the far-right and the far-left. Instead, it seeks to understand how they interact online, and in doing so examine how central the opposition to the 'other side' is to their self-definition. This understanding is an important element of assessing the nature of far-right and far-left movements and their mobilisation. The authors of this briefing recognise that far-right and far-left ideologies and movements are radically opposed in values, ethical standpoints and goals, and are not meant to be considered as equivalents at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum.

The choice of the terms 'far-right' and 'far-left' is aimed to capture a range of groups on both sides of the ideological spectrum. We use the terms far-right and far-left as umbrella terms that cover radical and extreme ideologies and groups, with the latter differing from the former by their explicitly anti-democratic stance. In the case of the far-left all of the groups identified are not anti-democratic in their Facebook activity, and thus could be described by the narrower term 'radical left'. However, as this paper is part of a series analysing far-left and far-right activity across a range of social media platforms the term 'far-left' is retained here for consistency.

The interplay between different forms of radical ideologies and movements has been the object of growing academic interest in recent years. The way in which opposing radical movements interact and at times fuel each other – also known as reciprocal radicalisation³ – has frequently manifested in clashes between far-right activists and anti-fascist groups in many parts of the Western world. Ideological antagonisms between right and left have spilled into violent confrontations in the streets, showing a revival with the intensification of ideological culture wars.

Throughout 2019, clashes between far-right and far-left groups took place globally. Confrontations between far-right and far-left actors occurred in the US in Portland, and in the UK when supporters of the far-right activist

Tommy Robinson gathered in London in August. This trend has continued into 2020, with a number of violent clashes throughout the US sparked by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis during a police arrest in May. These protests quickly grew into a global protest movement against institutional racism and police violence.

Australia, and in particular Victoria, has not been immune to confrontations and at times violent escalation between far-right and far-left anti-fascist groups during a number of street clashes between 2015 and 2019.⁴ In December 2019, Philip Galea, who was affiliated with several far-right groups in Victoria, was convicted of planning a terrorist attack on a number of left-wing venues in Melbourne – the first time Australia's anti-terror laws were applied to a far-right extremist.⁵

The global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and subsequent local lockdowns in Australia have led to limited opportunities for offline confrontations between these opposing political movements. Instead the mutual attacks on the political enemy have retreated online, where the interplay between both opposing movements is of a more rhetorical-ideological rather than action-oriented nature. However, this may change in the future as tactics and actions of movements shift in response to various external and internal circumstances, which affect the 'ebb and flow' of the interaction between opposing movements.⁶ It is therefore crucial to gain evidence-based insights into the interplay between the far-right and far-left online in order to enhance understanding of the mobilisation patterns, narratives and tactics of both movements.

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GLOSSARY

FAR-RIGHT

When creating our working definition of the far-right we drew on established scholarship, although we recognise that there is no unanimously agreed definition of far-right. We refer to the well-established conceptualisations of right-wing extremism, put forward by academics such as Cas Mudde and others, which understand the extreme right to be typically marked by several of the following characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong-state advocacy and authoritarianism. We use the generic umbrella term far-right to cover both radical and extreme right-wing groups, actions and ideologies. The conceptual difference between right-wing radicalism and extremism is that the former is not explicitly anti-democratic (e.g. far-right libertarian, anti-Islam groups), while the latter is characterised also by an explicit anti-democratic stance (e.g. openly fascist, neo-Nazi groups). Both share the core ideology of exclusivist nationalism, which openly advocates against the principle of egalitarianism.

FAR-LEFT

There is no broadly agreed definition of the far-left, because there is less established scholarship on radical or far-left actions and groups in contemporary Western societies than there is on far-right groups. Following March and Mudde,⁷ and resonating with the differentiation of the far-right, we propose making a distinction between left-wing radicalism and extremism, where the latter groups are, again, anti-democratic, and the former advocate fundamental political and economic changes without being anti-democratic per se. Radical left groups, actions or networks are typically rooted in Marxist, Socialist or Anarchist ideologies, and pursue an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-fascist agenda, often with an internationalist outlook.⁸ Often radical left groups can be identified by the use of certain symbolism (e.g. Antifa flag, three arrows). Left-wing groups may or may not see violence, especially against their political opponents (e.g. perceived representatives of fascism and capitalism), as a legitimate tool to pursue their political agenda.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the research was to gain a more evidence-based understanding of the interplay in Australia between the far-right and the far-left on Facebook.

Facebook is one of the most commonly used social media platforms in Australia, with the company reporting 13 million active users monthly in the country,⁹ over half of Australia's population (25.5 million in 2020).¹⁰ It is frequently used for political mobilisation online, including by fringe political groups.¹¹ We conducted an analysis of the far-right and far-left Facebook ecosystem in Australia between 1 January and 31 July 2020 and looked at 43 far-right and 31 far-left pages, as well as seven far-right and two far-left public groups.¹²

A team of researchers at the University of Victoria provided an initial list of organisations, groups and individuals associated with the far-right and far-left in Australia, which were identified through ongoing research into mobilisation by the far-right and far-left. Using our assessment of the online activity of these organisations, groups and individuals, as well as pre-existing literature relating to certain groups, we determined their relevance to our definition of the far-right and far-left.

We expanded the list through a 'snowball' discovery method. Researchers followed groups and pages in the seed list and used Facebook's recommendation algorithms to identify further pages and groups, assessing their relevance to the definitions of far-right and far-left through a qualitative assessment of their online activity, imagery and self-description. Pages and groups were only included if they covered nationwide matters or issues specific to the State of Victoria. Pages and groups which had a specific regional geographical focus in Australia outside the State of Victoria were excluded from the research.

While ISD identified seven far-right and two far-left public Facebook groups, we also identified eight far-right private Facebook groups which were relevant to the analysis. The latter were classified on the basis of their visible self-identification, name and the imagery displayed. The content produced by private groups is visible to members only and can only be analysed through ethnographic monitoring. For ethical reasons, we excluded these pages from the analysis.

We used the Facebook data aggregator CrowdTangle to analyse publicly available content from public pages and groups and run search queries.¹³ This content was downloaded to perform a topic-modelling exercise using

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machine learning technology. Topic modelling automates the identification of key topics of discussion in a dataset by analysing patterns of language and word associations with a natural language processing (NLP) tool (see Methodology below and Appendices for details).

We supplemented topic analysis performed using commercial and bespoke machine learning tools with qualitative analysis by the research team of the content produced by the pages and groups examined in this research. This qualitative analysis allowed us to draw more precise insights into the narratives shared by pages and groups.

ANALYSIS OF THE FAR-RIGHT

This section examines the activities of far-right Facebook pages and groups in Australia. It analyses the general volume of discussion produced by these entities between January and July 2020. We use our dataset to assess the proportion of content related to the far-left and examine the way those on the far-right discuss what they consider to be the 'left'.¹⁴

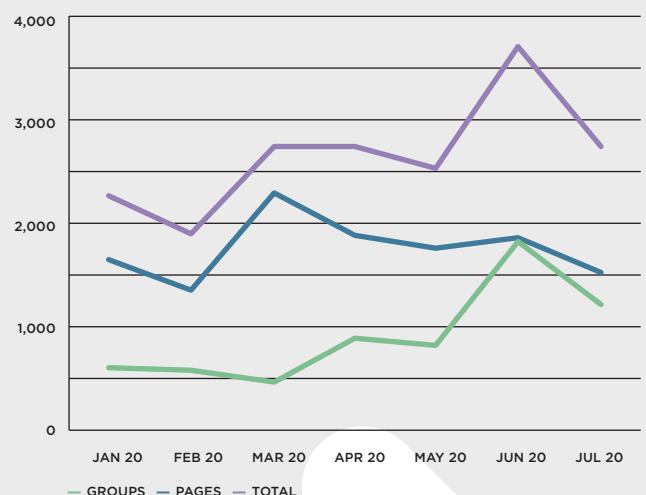
The 'left' and BLM – a movement closely associated with left-wing and progressive causes – were identified as a key topic of discussion in far-right groups, driven by a small number of very active groups defined by their focus on anti-left mobilisation, while output produced on pages focused on more general topics, including national and international politics, migration and climate change.

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GENERAL VOLUME OF POSTS ON FACEBOOK OVER TIME

During our period of study (January to July 2020), there were 12,335 posts on far-right pages and 6,461 posts on far-right groups. There were seven groups in our dataset compared with 41 pages; groups were proportionately much more active than pages, and increased their activities in June (when the BLM movement took hold internationally and in Australia), going from 812 posts in May to 1,836 in June (Figure 1). Through their focus on what they consider the 'left' and BLM, groups were more reactive to local events such as left-leaning protests (e.g. local BLM rallies and climate action protests).

Figure 1 Posts on Facebook far-right groups and on far-right pages, January–July 2020



KEY TOPICS OF DISCUSSION ON FAR-RIGHT PAGES AND BY GROUPS ON FACEBOOK

To better understand the centrality of the far-left to far-right mobilisation online and the key drivers of far-right activity, we sought to determine the most salient topics of discussion on far-right pages and among far-right groups. Understanding motivating factors is essential if robust and effective responses to far-right

activity are to be established in policy and counter-extremism practice.

To do this we conducted a topic-modelling exercise using NLP classifiers. This computational technique allows researchers to identify key topics within a dataset while avoiding introducing potential unconscious biases into the analysis. A brief description of topic modelling and how NLP classifiers are used is presented in Appendix 1. Table 1 lists the key topics of discussion identified by the classifier.

Table 1 The key topics of conversation among far-right groups and on far-right pages on Facebook, January–July 2020

FAR-RIGHT PAGES	FAR-RIGHT GROUPS
COVID-19	BLM PROTESTS
IMMIGRATION AND MIGRATION	RELIGION AND ISLAM
AUSTRALIAN POLITICS	COVID-19 CONSPIRACIES
CLIMATE CHANGE	IMMIGRATION AND MIGRATION
US POLITICS	THE LEFT
AUSTRALIA-CHINA RELATIONS	CHINA

Lists of keywords were established for each of these themes using researchers' pre-existing knowledge as well as existing academic literature.¹⁵ The keywords were verified individually by analysing a random sample of ten posts mentioning the keyword in the dataset to remove false positives – terms which gave too many irrelevant results and risked skewing the findings. Only keywords which produced at least 70% of relevant results were validated for this analysis.¹⁶ This validation process allowed us to produce verified lists of keywords for topic analysis.

Figure 2 Topics of discussion in far-right pages on Facebook, January–July 2020

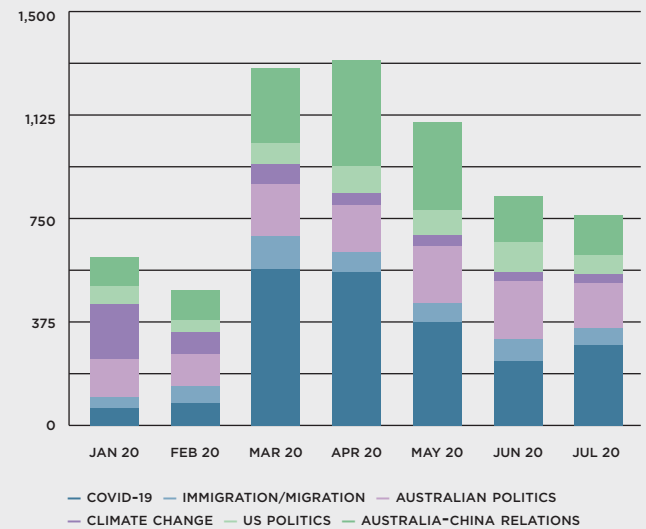


Figure 2 shows the volume of posts on far-right pages of Facebook between January and July 2020 for each topic. The most discussed was the COVID-19 pandemic, peaking at 652 posts in March and coinciding with the time when Australia introduced strict social distancing measures as COVID-19 cases increased in Europe. In the subsequent months, posts about COVID-19 dropped off but still remained relatively high, at around 250 per month. There was a surge in discussion of Chinese–Australian relations – another topic often linked to COVID-19 – peaking in April at 276 posts before coming down again to around 130 posts between May and July.

Discussion about COVID-19 increased sharply on far-right pages alongside mentions of China. Many posts about COVID-19 combined discussion of the pandemic with other subjects, including Islam and China. These posts discussed China and Muslim countries' responses to coronavirus in derogatory terms or commented on the need to stop relying on Chinese imports due to China's role in spreading the virus (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Facebook posts about coronavirus, January–July 2020

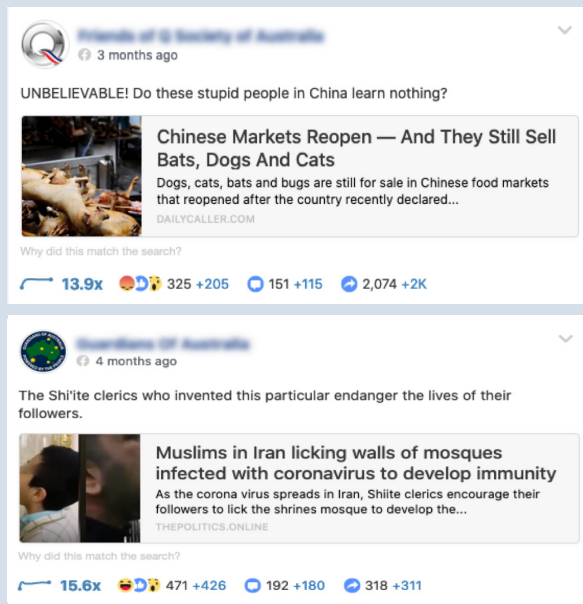


Figure 4 Facebook posts about China–Australia relations, January–July 2020



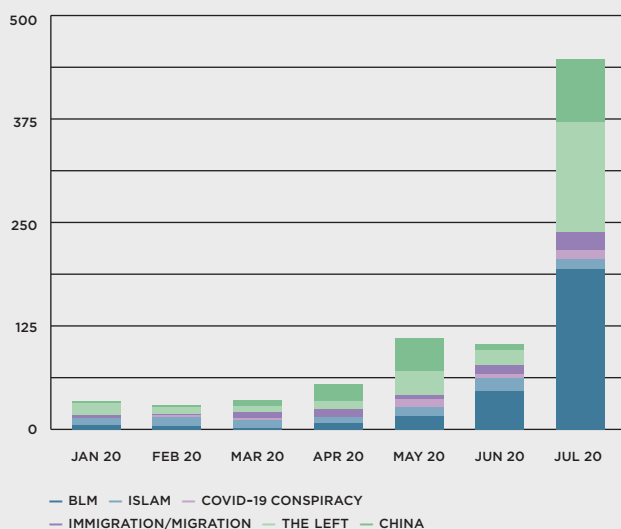
The high volume of posts about China–Australia relations in April followed increasing discussion of how China was to blame for COVID-19, spurred by President Trump's declarations blaming China for the virus. Over-performing posts included a video of President Trump blaming China for the spread of COVID-19, with the caption 'The Don is standing up to China'.¹⁷ The Australian government's call for an independent probe into the origin of the virus in late April, which led to political backlash from China, may also have fuelled these discussions about China.

Posts about China–Australia relations were generally anti-Chinese, holding China responsible for the 'Wuhan virus', and claiming that China had been exploiting Australia by purchasing Australian land before COVID-19. There were repeated calls to stop trading with China and allowing Chinese students to come to Australia. These anti-Chinese narratives reflect the far-right's attempts to weaponise the pandemic to encourage nationalistic, xenophobic and at times anti-communist views (Figure 4).

TOPICS OF DISCUSSION IN FAR-RIGHT GROUPS

The distribution of key topics among far-right groups differs from that on far-right pages. While COVID-19 was a key topic on far-right pages and increased substantially in March and April 2020, the volume of posts about the pandemic was more stable among far-right groups. However, posts about China increased significantly in April 2020, mirroring a similar trend on pages (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Posts on Facebook far-right groups by topic, January–July 2020



The most discussed topics in between January and July 2020 on far-right groups were the BLM protests and the left. Both topics received a mean of 138 posts per month. The trends in posting for these two topics mirror each other – both spiked sharply in June, around the most active period of the BLM protests mainly in the US but also in Australia. These similarities can be explained by the fact that the BLM protests were strongly associated with left-wing activism.

The spike in discussion about BLM protests and the left in July coincided with the time when protests against institutional racism were most widespread in the US and had reached Australia. The majority of over-performing posts attacked BLM protesters or depicted them as dangerous. These included posts highlighting Trump's move

Figure 6 Facebook post about Antifa, January–July 2020



Figure 7 Facebook posts with anti-China content, January–July 2020



to label Antifa a terrorist organisation (Figure 6).

Further posts highlighted the fact that BLM protests had gone ahead despite social distancing regulations and other rallies like Anzac Day being banned.

China was a significant topic of discussion from April onwards, as it was on far-right pages. Posts about China rose from 27 in January to 160 in April, settling down at this new higher level. Narratives in groups mirrored those found on pages: posts by groups expressed support for border closures and hostility towards China and Chinese citizens (Figure 7).

DISCUSSION OF THE FAR-LEFT

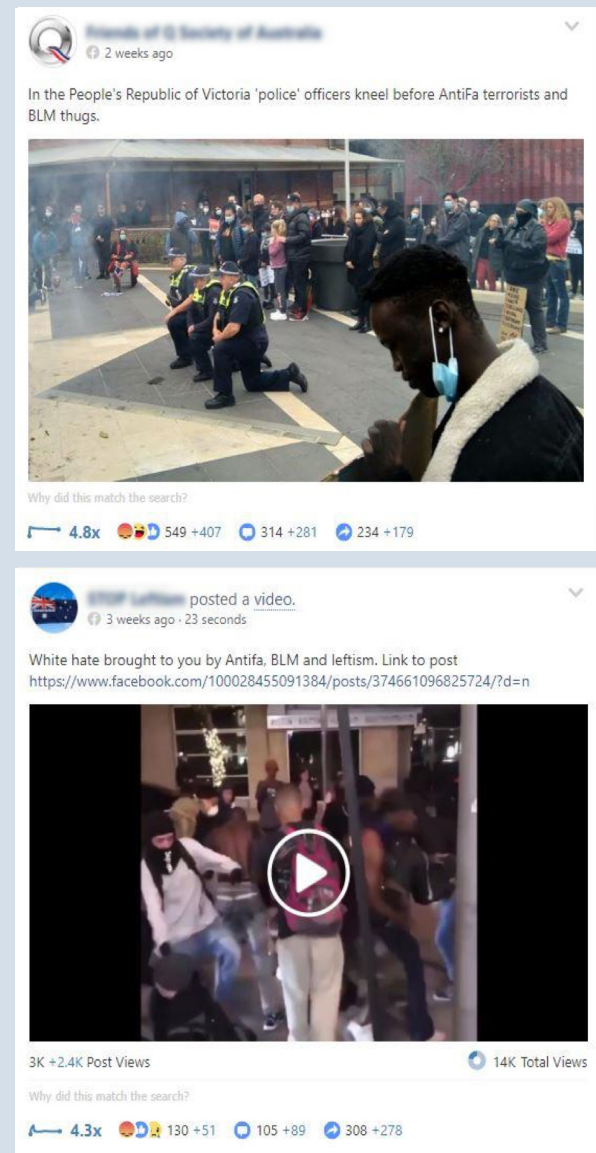
We ran a set of keywords associated with the far-left in our list of far-right pages and groups to identify content related to their political opponents.¹⁸ We determined that discussion which used any of the terms pointing to far-left groups or ideologies accounted for 7% of the total output of pages and groups (Figure 8).

There was a sharp increase in discussion about the far-left on far-right pages in May 2020, followed by an increase in posts by groups in June and July, fuelled by anti-racist protests. Over-performing posts on far-right pages included posts attacking BLM and vowing to

Figure 8 Posts on Facebook about the far-left on Facebook, January–July 2020



Figure 9 Facebook posts about Antifa and BLM, January–July 2020



defend historical statues in Australia, which their authors claim could be attacked by far-left activists (Figure 9).

A limited number of pages and groups were responsible for nearly all content produced about the far-left during the research period. One group accounted for 67% of groups' posts about the far-left. Three pages produced 54% of all pages' output related to the far-left. This suggests that, while present across the far-right ecosystem on Facebook, anti-left mobilisation is being driven by a small number of very active pages.

KEY NARRATIVES ABOUT THE FAR-LEFT

In order to identify salient narratives in discussions about the far-left, researchers conducted a qualitative, multimodal analysis of 141 selected posts on far-right pages and by groups that referred to the far-left.¹⁹

LABELLING OF THE 'FAR-LEFT'

As reported above, discussion about the far-left was primarily linked to recent events and key topics of discussion in the media, including climate change activism, COVID-19 and BLM in the US and Australia. Secondary topics included Australia Day (e.g. Invasion Day rallies), the Australian government's relationship with China (e.g. the Belt and Road Initiative) and foreign land ownership in Australia. Only very few posts referred to the far-left without a specific 'hook'.

When those posting on far-right pages and groups use terms such as 'communist', 'socialist', 'Marxist' or 'Antifa' – or sometimes even 'Stalinism' – they often used these labels interchangeably. In many instances, the Australian Labor Party or the Greens were considered to be far-left by those writing on far-right pages and members of far-right groups. These terms were therefore used as a generic label ascribed to the political other, understood as any individual, group or action that does not align with the nationalist agenda. A user in the Q Society page, for example, suggested in a post that people who oppose anti-Islam views are Marxists. Another post called a young man 'Antifa' after he spoke out against racism.

A number of institutions were presented as complicit with the far-left. Mainstream media was portrayed as ignorant of the far-left agenda supposedly promoted by schools, universities, the government or other groups (e.g. climate change activists) or complicit in what is commonly described as 'Marxist indoctrination' and 'subversion'. Several posts and comments referred to a 'media cover up' and accused mainstream media of reporting 'fake news' and deliberately ignoring black-on-white crimes committed by refugees and non-white people.

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PERCEPTIONS OF FAR-LEFT IDEOLOGIES

Many posts and comments in the dataset referred to far-left ideologies, as opposed to the people who subscribe to them. Socialism, communism, Marxism and far-left ideologies or systems were portrayed as the destructive antithesis of Australia's ideal society and economic and political system.

Through qualitative analysis, we identified three main themes in the way these ideologies are presented:

- It was argued on far-right pages and far-right groups that far-left ideologies take away 'our' freedoms and control what 'we' are allowed to think, say or do. We identified this messaging in the context of claims of government and police overreach in response to the pandemic health crisis, the Safe School programme in Victorian schools, and the alleged pressure on anti-Islam groups curbing free speech (see post above).
- Many posts and comments highlighted the anti-capitalist agenda of far-left ideologies accusing those behind them of destroying the economy, which has had negative implications for the wellbeing of society (e.g. the availability of basic goods; 'empty shelves').
- Socialism and communism were associated with a history of violence. A number of posts and comments pointed to the murderous and genocidal history of communist regimes. However, a few posts linked supposedly communist governments with violence today; one post, for example, claimed the 'African communist government' endorses violence towards white farmers in South Africa.

PERCEPTIONS OF FAR-LEFT GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS

Many posts in the dataset targeted specific groups and individuals allegedly linked to Antifa, Marxist, socialist or communist agendas or movements such as BLM and the climate action protests. The language in these posts was more aggressive and at times dehumanising (e.g. 'Marxist leftists filth', 'dogs', 'pack of animals'). Individuals and groups associated with the far-left were portrayed as the out-group that represents the antithesis to ordinary, decent, nationalist or patriotic Australians. They were frequently referred to as 'traitors' and likened to violent thugs.

Left-wing activists were accused of being deceptive and hypocritical by hiding their anti-capitalist agendas behind causes such as anti-racism and climate activism. Some alleged that left-wing activists willingly benefit from the capitalist system while simultaneously agitating against it. Some posts pointed to hypocrisy by claiming that the far-left mobilise for social justice and against violence but are violent themselves and ignore violence when perpetrated by refugees or other minorities against whites. They were also described as over-educated but dim-witted, easily manipulated 'cowards' and likened to 'spoilt' and 'precious Millennials'. This depiction of left-wing activists as weak cowards contrasted with the common labelling of them as violent thugs.

While the association of the far-left with violence commonly appeared in posts about BLM and Antifa, accusations of violence also occurred in other contexts (e.g. an Invasion Day rally). The prominent far-left group Socialist Alternative was referred to as 'the largest, best organised and most violent political extremist group in Australia today'.

The depiction of far-left groups and activists as an out-group goes hand in hand with the allegation that they encourage polarisation and division in society. A key component of

this accusation is that, alongside certain media outlets such as the Special Broadcasting Service, they are driven by hatred towards Western culture and 'anti-white racism'. Accusations of anti-white racism often appeared in posts about BLM.

CALL TO (VIOLENT) ACTION AGAINST THE FAR-LEFT

Our analysis of posts and comments on far-right pages and by groups identified various calls to action against the left broadly speaking, including the far-left. Some simply urged others to vote out certain left-leaning state governments, other called on 'authorities' to ban Antifa as a terrorist organisation, 'outlaw Socialist Alliance' or to lock up and/or charge left-wing activists for 'treason'. Several posts of a prominent far-right figure urged the community to form local vigilante networks to protect statues linked to Australia's colonial past from being targeted and pulled down by the 'extreme left'.

In addition to these calls for non-violent action, we identified many examples of calls to violence in the comment sections under posts. These often appeared on posts which referred to the allegedly violent nature of the left.

In many cases, the threat of violence was directed at a collective or group (e.g. protesters, Antifa), for example: 'shot [sic] first, ask later', 'this lot needs to be hung as traitors', 'put a sniper there, no prisoners' or 'Put a bounty on antifa \$10 alive \$100 dead.' In several instances, however, the call to violent action targeted specific individuals. One referred to the co-founder of the Safe School programme (named in the pertinent post): '[Name] you mess with my child, you get a real fist full.' One comment in response to a post on the spokeswoman of the climate action group Uni Students for Climate Justice reads: 'This witch should be burnt at the stake.' (Figure 10).

Figure 10 Facebook posts threatening violence, January–July 2020



ANALYSIS OF THE FAR-LEFT

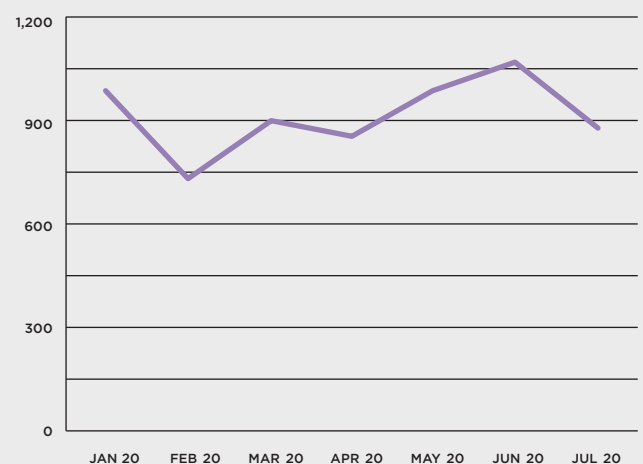
This section analyses the activities of far-left Facebook pages and far-left groups in Australia. After a brief overview on the general volume and nature of content produced by these entities during the research period, it assesses the proportion of material relating to the far-right and the way the far-right is discussed.²⁰

Key topics of discussion on far-left pages and far-left groups differed considerably from those of the far-right and focused on social and economic issues, with labour rights, Aboriginal rights and housing being key issues of interest. In the same way as the trends observed on far-right pages, discussion of COVID-19 increased in March and April 2020, although coverage of the pandemic was different in nature.

GENERAL VOLUME OVER TIME

During our period of study (January to July 2020), there were 6,295 posts on far-left pages and 89 posts on far-left groups. While the list of pages included 31 entities, we were only able to identify two public Facebook groups that matched our working definition of the far-left. We were therefore only able to observe a limited amount of content produced on far-left groups. The general volume of posts produced on far-left pages and far-left groups was consistent over time, with only a notable increase in June, with 1,040 posts on pages (up from 968 in May) and 25 posts on far-left groups (up from 13 the preceding month) (Figure 11).

Figure 11 Posts on Facebook on far-left pages and far-left groups combined, January–July 2020



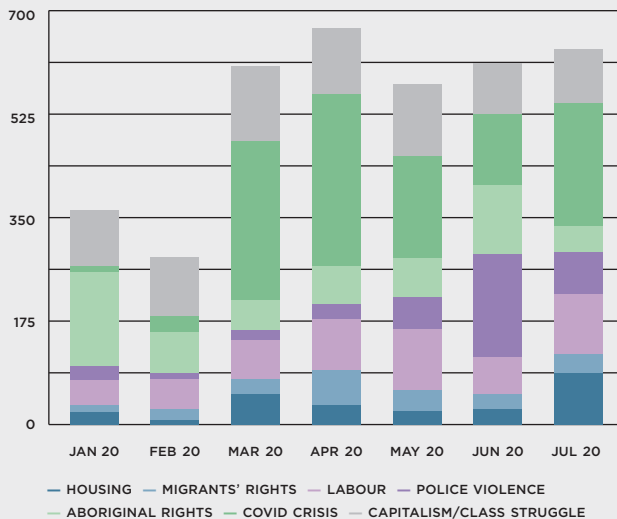
KEY TOPICS OF DISCUSSION

Using the same methodology as outlined above, we computationally identified key topics of discussion on far-left pages and among far-left groups. The volume of output produced by the two far-left groups identified at the beginning of the study was insufficient to detect key themes with machine learning techniques. We therefore applied the themes identified for far-left pages to far-left groups:

- Housing
- Migrants' rights
- Labour rights
- Police violence
- Aboriginal rights
- The COVID crisis
- Capitalism and the class struggle.

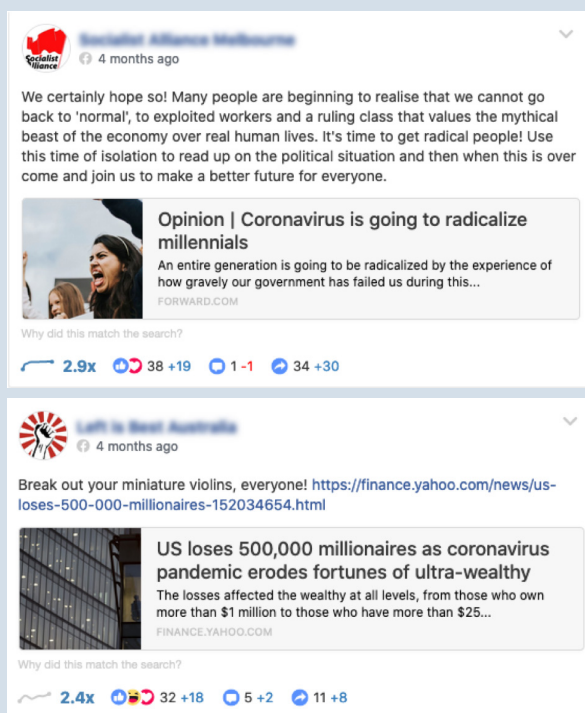
The combined results for far-left pages and groups are presented in Figure 12.

Figure 12 Posts on Facebook on far-left pages and far-left groups by topic, January–July 2020



The most discussed topic on far-left pages and far-left groups between January and July was COVID-19, as it was on far-right pages and far-right groups, with a mean number of 163 posts per month, compared with an average of 76 posts across the other topics.

Figure 13 Facebook posts about coronavirus, January–July 2020



Again, we observed a significant spike in COVID-19 discussion in March and April, when the virus started spreading in Europe and Australia, although the narratives observed were radically different. Posts included frequent calls for solidarity with employees who were laid off, alongside satisfaction that wealthy individuals and companies were losing money (Figure 13).

Discussion about police violence – related to BLM – spiked in June, with the majority of over-performing posts expressing support for the movement and condemning police brutality (Figure 14).

Two other prominent topics of discussion during the period of study were Aboriginal rights (peak at 161 posts in January and slight increase in June)

Figure 14 Facebook posts about BLM, January–July 2020



and labour rights (peak at 119 posts in May).

The high volume of posts in January correlated with Australia Day on 26 January. Popular posts in far-left entities referred to Australia Day as 'Invasion Day' and highlighted that Australian land was stolen from Aboriginal peoples. A number of posts mentioned the impact of bushfires in late 2019 on Aboriginal Australians and called for a return of indigenous lands (Figure 15). The rise in June correlated with BLM protests – with the struggle against police mistreatment of Aboriginals, and more specifically against Aboriginal deaths in custody, being presented as part of the same fight against institutional racism that BLM is

waging in other parts of the world.

We also observed a spike in posts relating to labour rights in May, rising from an average of 70 to 119 posts. In most posts in May there was a discussion of how COVID-19 and the related recession were affecting labour rights and the working class, including how right-wing leaders were putting 'profit before lives' by removing lockdown restrictions. Many referred to job losses and wage cuts, presented as mainly affecting the working class, and accused the government of failing to do enough to prevent economic hardship (Figure 16).

Figure 15 Facebook posts about Aboriginal rights, January–July 2020



Figure 16 Facebook posts about labour rights, January–July 2020

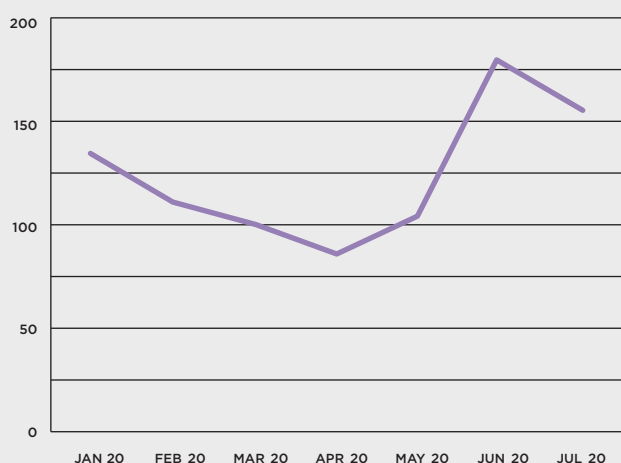


DISCUSSION ABOUT THE FAR-RIGHT

Following the same methodology adopted for analysing activities on far-right pages and far-right groups, we ran a set of keywords associated with the far-right in far-left pages and groups.²¹ We combined the results because of the small number of far-left groups and pages. Between January and July, we identified 1,067 posts about the far-right on far-left pages and 5 posts on far-left groups.

Posts that used a keyword associated with the far-right accounted for 17% of the output of far-left pages, in contrast to 7% of discussion within far-right entities that referred to the far-left. This difference suggests that anti-right mobilisation is more central to the far-left rhetoric and agenda than anti-left mobilisation is to the far-right. Many far-left groups have opposed the political right, including the far-right and fascism, a core aspect of their group identity and agenda, which is often also reflected in their names and self-descriptions.

Figure 17 Posts on Facebook about the far-right on far-left pages and far-left groups, January–July 2020



Discussion about the far-right increased substantially on far-left pages in June, peaking at 176 posts in that month (Figure 17). An analysis of over-performing posts showed that these documented international and national examples of anti-right mobilisation, which came as a response to left-wing and anti-racist protests or attempted to expose alleged far-right

militants and condemned racism.

Three pages produced 49% of all posts about the far-right, a similar pattern as that found in far-right activity.

KEY NARRATIVES ABOUT THE FAR-RIGHT

To explore how far-left pages and groups define and discuss their political opponents on the far-right in their online messaging, we conducted a qualitative multimodal content analysis of 114 selected posts on pages and by groups, using the same methodology that was applied for the far-right. Some variations were introduced in the selection of the posts to allow for a dataset as diverse as that compiled for the far-right (see Appendix 4 for details).

Discussion about the far-right was frequently associated with recent events and crises, including debates around climate change and bushfires, the management of COVID-19 and BLM in the US and Australia. These events were used to talk about political opponents on the far-right. While these themes were a rallying point, a wide range of posts were unrelated to them. For example, many referred to far-right attacks, white supremacy threats in the US, far-right incidents in Europe and Hindu nationalism in India, as well as various domestic incidents in Australia. Many discussed anti-fascists events (e.g. radio shows, rallies, conferences) or expressed solidarity with anti-fascist activists overseas (e.g. in US, Russia, Chile).

The online messaging on far-left pages and by groups often draws direct or indirect links between state institutions such as the police, political parties, governments and certain ministers, and representatives of the 'capitalist system' (e.g. 'billionaires', 'corporations', the 'coal lobby') to fascism and far-right ideologies. In a small number of posts, the government and its actions were described as 'fascist' and the label was also applied to leading politicians.

What we found more often was that state institutions were portrayed as crypto-fascist or

complicit in the rise or emboldening of the far-right.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE FAR-RIGHT

Political opponents on the far-right are pitched against a claimed 'us', which is associated with the righteous fight for equality, antifascism and solidarity with the working class and the oppressed around the world. Figure 18 illustrates this dichotomy, describing the grassroots community response to a far-right incident in Victoria (flying a Nazi flag) as 'real antifascist action' and contrasting it with a potential state response to ban Nazi symbols.

The fight against the far-right is presented as a continuation of historical opposition to fascism that reaches back to the rise of fascism in the 1930s and the military fight against, and defeat of, Nazi Germany. For example, one post with the hashtag #AnzacDay reads, 'Your Grandparents smashed Nazism. You can too', accompanied by a picture of victorious allied forces in World War II and a series of images of prominent Australian far-right figures (Figure 19).

Figure 18 Facebook post addressing anti-fascist action, 19 January 2020



Figure 19 Facebook posts about Nazism, 25 April and 13 May 2020



Historic references are used to express the urgency of action against what is regarded as current developments towards totalitarianism and fascism around the world, including in Australia and the US. For instance, one Facebook group posted a link to an Australian mainstream media article on a proposed bill aimed at expanding the powers of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation as 'one more step towards a totalitarian state' (Figure 19).

CALL TO ACTION AGAINST THE FAR-RIGHT

Many posts were accompanied by explicit calls to action, inviting and encouraging others to become active in various ways, from listening to particular radio shows or attending a rally or conference to organising local community help, putting up anti-fascist stickers or responding to far-right disruptions at events. Calls for violence against representatives of the far-right were very rare, and vague when they occurred. In American Antifa the sociologist Stanislav Vysotsky identified a broad list of anti-fascist actions, and similar actions emerged from the dataset (Figure 20).²²

In the lead-up to several offline rallies, including climate action protests and the BLM (Death in

Custody) rally in Melbourne, some posts suggested ways to respond to anticipated attempts by alleged far-right figures to disrupt the protests. The general advice for protest attendees was twofold:

- Calls to avoid taking the bait and to prevent any escalation of violence by not engaging with far-right provocateurs at the rally
- Calls to counter far-right mobilisation, propaganda or threats, for example by removing or covering far-right stickers in public places, which seems to have become one of the few offline arenas where far-right and far-right anti-fascist groups 'fight' each other (see Figure 21).

There were no calls for physically violent action in response to far-right threats in the random selection of posts. However, a very small number of comments alluded to potentially violent acts of defence or retaliation. In one instance, a

Figure 20 Facebook post about a range of anti-fascist actions

As we always say, antifa is anti-fascism and a series of tactics, not really an organisation - and definitely not a cartoon illustration of a masked thug at a rally holding a Molotov. Let me list some other anti-fascist tactics I've seen done over the years to real effect. They can be as anti-fascist as black bloc as part of a broader coordinated effort. They include (but aren't limited to):

- Research
- Cataloguing
- Medic work
- Education
- Repairing fences
- Phone calls
- Writing
- Playing in a band
- Feeding people
- Donating
- Child minding
- Repairing potholes
- Hosting events
- Meetings
- Repairing a door
- Comedy
- Catfishing

Figure 21 Facebook post about covering far-right stickers in public places, 28 May 2020



May 28 · 🌐

In the light of recent fash sticker runs, some commenters have been itching to get their hands on antifascist stickers for free, and CARF are offering the same right now. We'd still suggest you make an effort to tear down fash stickers before you apply your own. We should also disclaim their use of the Nazi-derived term "Blitz" to describe these efforts, which feels odd in this context.

commentator responded to a post about a local member of a neo-Nazi group who had allegedly 'intimidated women of colour' in the local area of Footscray in Melbourne. Seemingly alluding to setting up a local vigilante force, a commentator asked: 'Any other Footscray locals interested in organising to manage such situations?' In response to a post about a swastika painted over the sticker of an anti-fascist Jewish group, one comment read: 'Hopefully we can find who and where they are. Someone can pay them a visit maybe.'

Without explicitly advocating violence against the far-right, a very small number of posts endorsed violence against the far-right or their property. One post suggested that a white supremacist, who attacked a mosque in Oslo, should 'follow his Fuehrer' and commit suicide. Another post sarcastically called it 'heartbreaking news' that a shop in a Melbourne suburb that sold Nazi insignia was damaged and covered in graffiti ('re-decoration') by a self-declared anarchist group and had subsequently closed down, endorsing and celebrating the damage to the property.

CONCLUSION

Our analysis shows that international events including the COVID-19 pandemic and BLM were at the heart of discussion in the far-right and far-left online space in Australia throughout the first half of 2020.

COVID-19 led to a simultaneous increase in online activity on far-right and far-left pages and by groups in March and April. However, the far-right and the far-left had different narratives on COVID-19, highlighting how the groups are adept at incorporating contemporary events into their specific ideological world views.

Beyond COVID-19, the international BLM protests resulted in a simultaneous increase in activity in far-right and far-left entities, with antagonistic narratives. The far-right focused on discrediting the movement, while the far-left's narrative focused on police violence and far-right mobilisation against the movement. During the BLM movement, far-right and far-left groups faced each other online through increased mobilisation.

While far-left activism has long defined itself through an internationalist lens, the internationalisation of the far-right is a more recent phenomenon. The Australian far-right's engagement with international events reflects this trend. This points towards the importance of recognising international trends in the analysis of radical and extremist groups, and has potential implications for practitioners and policy makers seeking to identify flash-points in activity on both the far-right and far-left.

Our analysis highlights the reciprocal dynamics between the far-right and far-left on Facebook. Each side constructs a strong us versus them narrative, labelling the other as a threat to society, while accusing state institutions and

media of siding with their political enemy on the far-right or far-left, respectively. This can be attributed to the way the far-left defines opposition to the far-right, which includes not only far-right movements and ideologies, but also state institutions presented as enablers of the far-right.

Perhaps because of the centrality of far-right activity to far-left mobilisation, and recent violent clashes between the far-left and far-right globally one might expect far-left groups to advocate violence towards the far-right. However, a qualitative analysis of far-right and far-left activity on Facebook found that far-right groups were more likely to promote violence against the left than vice-versa, highlighting how the far-right seem to represent a greater security risk than the far-left. This is supported by research which highlights how far-right terrorism is on average five times more deadly than far-left terrorism.²³ This suggests that responses to the far-right at a local and national level will not only be more effective at mitigating the risk of violence, but may also limit reciprocal activity by the far-left in response to far-right mobilisation, which some view as problematic.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

TOPIC MODELLING

We downloaded all the publicly available content produced on far-right pages and far-right groups from January to July 2020 and used Method52, a bespoke machine learning and NLP tool developed by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at the University of Sussex, to analyse them.

We analysed the data with an unstructured NLP algorithm, using a process known as 'clustering' or 'topic discovery'. Clustering is an unsupervised NLP technique, which does not require human intervention during operation in order to produce analytical results. The overall aim of this technology is to determine a number of discrete 'topics' – distinct themes that occur within a given dataset.

NLP CLASSIFIER METHODOLOGY

This is how unstructured NLP technology works:

- All documents for a dataset are put into a clustering component.
- The user determines the number of clusters in the output.
- A clustering algorithm called 'latent Dirichlet allocation' (LDA), a well understood approach to topic modelling within the field of NLP, is deployed in this data.
- LDA attempts to generate coherent topics within the dataset mathematically. It looks at what words are present ('co-occur') between documents.
- Using this assessment of word occurrence, the LDA algorithm assesses the likelihood that any given word is linked to any given cluster.
- Based on this assessment of each word within the data set, the LDA algorithm assesses the likelihood that any given document is linked to each cluster.

APPENDIX 2

KEYWORDS FOR FAR-RIGHT PAGES

COVID-19: corona, coronavirus, COVID-19, infection, Wuhan, new cases, virus, pandemic, lockdown, vaccine, cure, transmission, health

Immigration and migration: migrant, immigration, migration, refugee, asylum, visa, border, border protection

Australian politics: Parliament, Daniel Andrews, Scott Morrison, council, governing, politics, politician, governmental, parliamentary, liberal party, Australian Labor Party, National Party, Pauline Hanson, One Nation, Anthony Albanese

Climate change: climate change, global warming, climate, climate hysteria, warmist, climate cult, climate alarmist, extinction rebellion, fossil fuels, CO₂, greenhouse gas, emissions

US politics: Donald Trump, Trump, Joe Biden, Biden, Republican, Democrat, presidential election, Congress, congresswoman, GOP

Australia-China relations: diplomacy, Hong Kong, South China Sea, Chinese students, tensions, tariffs, China, Beijing, communist, communist party, Communist Party of China, CCP, Xi Jinping

KEYWORDS FOR FAR-RIGHT GROUPS

BLM protests: Black Lives Matter, BLM, protest, rally, racism, protester, demonstration, police violence, thug, antifa, destruction, black, white, death

Religion and Islam: Muslim, Islam, Sharia, Shariah, ISIS, mosque, Koran, Quran, Islamist, Akbar, burka, burqa, Imam, islamophobia, Islamisation

COVID conspiracies: plot, 5G, Bill Gates, bioweapon, vaccine, lab, manipulation, cover up, virus hoax, plandemic

Immigration and migration: migrant, immigration, migration, refugee, asylum, visa, asylum seeker, border, invasion, border security, border protection, the left, China

The left: socialist, left-wing, left, leftist, lefty, leftard, communist, commie, woke, cancel culture, freedom of speech, snowflake, political correctness, Antifa, anti-fascist, Marxist, Marxism, anarchist, socialism

China: China, Xi Jinping, BRI, Belt and Road Initiative, Hong Kong, Beijing, Chinese, Xi, Wuhan, Huawei, communist, Communist Party, Communist Party of China, CCP, Chinese virus, China lied

KEYWORDS FOR FAR-LEFT PAGES

Housing: public housing, social housing, blocks, eviction, renter, tenant, landlord, rent, estate, housing estate, eviction notice

Migrants' rights: refugee, detention centre, immigration, asylum seeker, asylum, immigrant, detention conditions, fundamental rights

Labour: worker, wages, job losses, union, job keeper, job seeker, job protection, job, recession, economic crisis, depression, economic fallout, jobless, workforce job cuts

Police violence: police brutality, police violence, Black Lives Matter, BLM, cops, racist police, racism police, institutional racism, police custody, incarceration, violent police, police station, cop shop, arrest racism

Aboriginal rights: Aboriginal, indigenous, Aboriginal Legal Service, racial discrimination, first nation, APY [Aangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara], assimilation, indigenous Australians, land use, reconciliation, Torres Strait Islander people, Torres Strait Islander, Uluru, aboriginal nations, aboriginal communities, sovereignty

COVID-19 crisis: COVID, COVID-19, coronavirus, lockdown, case numbers, new cases, health emergency, pandemic, second wave, vaccine, infection, hospital, cluster, restrictions

Capitalism and class struggle: class, Marx, Marxist, capitalism, capitalist, wealth, wealth inequality, social inequality, bourgeois, bourgeoisie, privileged, proletariat, class struggle, proletarian, proletarian revolution, means of production, wage slavery

APPENDIX 3

In selecting key narratives about the far-left, we used six search terms to select posts that directly referred to far-left groups and/or ideology: communist, socialist, Marxist, anarchist, leftist and Antifa. We included variants of these words in the search (e.g. 'communist', 'commie', 'communism'). For each of these search terms, researchers followed a four-stage selection process:

1. We collected the 10 most popular posts – those that received the most interactions (reactions, comments and shares).
2. We selected the next 10 most popular posts; in order to keep the dataset diverse, we excluded from this subset posts from groups that already had two or more posts in the qualitative data pool (stage 1).
3. Once 20 posts were selected, we checked if at least one post from every group that used a relevant keyword was included in the selection. If the selected 20 posts (stages 1 and 2) did not cover every group, add one additional post per group not included in the selection.
4. For each of these posts (around 20–30 per search term), we selected the 10 'most relevant' comments for analysis, determining relevancy qualitatively through a post's relationship to the topic at hand (e.g. attitudes to the far-left); discard irrelevant comments such as single-word answers.

This process generated a dataset of posts that reflects popularity while allowing researchers to access a broadly representative sample of posts from pages and groups. Researchers manually coded and analysed the content of the posts and associated comments, including textual content, imagery and videos. This qualitative analysis provided deep insights into the way in which far-right groups and pages discuss the far-left.

APPENDIX 4

To identify thematically relevant posts, we used the following search terms: alt-right, Nazi, Nazism, fascist, fascism and far-right. For each of these search terms, we followed a four-stage selection process:

1. We collected the 10 'most popular' posts – those that received the most interactions (reactions, comments and shares).
2. We selected the next 10 most popular posts; in order to keep our data diverse, we skipped posts from groups that already appeared twice or more in our new qualitative dataset.
3. On reaching 20 posts, if some pages and groups were not represented in our data, we added an additional post from each of them. Recognising that after following this process that our data set was not as rich as that of our far-right analysis, we decided to include more posts by including a further selection of 'most popular' posts until each search term reached a total of 30 posts.
4. We also included the 10 most relevant comments, where possible.

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- 12 It is our policy not to name pages associated with extremist and radical activity in our reports to avoid directing individuals to these entities. A full list of the pages and groups studied in this report can be provided on request.
- 13 This list of pages and groups comprised 43 entities. Two groups identified by researchers (Australians Against Sharia and XYZ) had been deleted by Facebook at the time of writing.
- 14 We identified references to the left on the basis of the use of certain key words in the posts, such as Marxism, socialism, communism, anarchism, leftards or left-wing (see Appendix 2). The dataset therefore reflects what the far-right regard as or associate with the left or far-left.
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- 19 The methodology for selecting these posts is provided in Appendix 3.
- 20 We identified references to the right on the basis of the use of certain key words in posts, such as fascism, Nazism, alt-right, far-right, right-wing. The database therefore reflects what the analysed far-left pages and groups consider far-right or associated with the far-right (e.g. police, government).
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