

CREST

Understanding Interactions between Conspiracy Communities and Far Right Groups on Telegram and the Role of Figureheads

MICE²

INTRODUCTION

Eruptions of violence during the coronavirus pandemic and the events of January 6th, 2021, exemplified the need to understand how conspiracy theories and far right ideology interact to create security threats. Social media presents as a key player in enabling the exchange between political messages and conspiracy theories, and this project sought to seek to understand the intra-actions and interactions between conspiracy communities and political groups.

To achieve this, we synthesise techniques from computer science and social science to analyse data from Telegram to consider groups on the far right of mainstream political parties and their interactions with conspiracy communities.

The first case study examines how groups relate to other groups whilst the second case study inspects the role of figureheads and group dynamics in conspiracy groups and far right groups (including those not considered extreme).

KEY FINDINGS:

- Interactions between conspiracy and far right groups are organised around three key master frames, which fulfil three key roles:

1. Isolator frame: Hidden truth – This frame remained salient throughout the time period studied and in previous studies (please see: [Introducing SHIFT Analysis and Understanding Intra-actions](#)



within QAnon: Co-presence of Conspiracy Beliefs and Extremism) however it was most influential in intra-actions than interactions as it served to isolate adherents from the broader mainstream.

- 2. Bridging frame:** Child protection – provided a united sense of purpose across disparate groups especially in the pandemic.
 - 3. Inspirational frame:** Freedom – motivated a radical response to rights being eroded and was particularly potent in the context of coronavirus restrictions.
- Figureheads and group dynamics played an important role in fostering interactions between groups and influencing intra-actions within groups.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNDERSTANDING INTERACTIONS BETWEEN CONSPIRACY COMMUNITIES AND FAR RIGHT GROUPS

INTERACTION CASE STUDY:

Interactions between far right and conspiracy groups on Telegram during pandemic

Network analysis shows the importance of Tommy Robinson as a key figure in connecting conspiracy and far right groups using 'bridging concepts' (ideas that resonate in both group frames). It also reveals that interaction is predominantly unidirectional in that conspiracy channels forward far right content, but it is not reciprocated. The inspirational frame: freedom and bridging frame: child protection fostered interaction between the two group types and motivated active behaviour.

FIGUREHEADS CASE STUDY:

Figurehead and group dynamic in conspiracy and far right groups

We identified accounts which had direct figurehead-led and follower-led equivalents. Generally, the far-right group structure tended to be more top-down and this was reflected in the larger number of channels compared to conspiracy accounts. The introduction of new topics and forwarding conspiracy groups' content tended to be done first by the figurehead equivalent. Conspiracy groups, on the other hand, tended to take a grassroots approach and fostered open discussion and group crossover events. New topics were often introduced by follower equivalents. This shows that both group types are vulnerable to manipulation either from idea injection at the top by figureheads or injection at the bottom by follower account users.

GLOSSARY

CONCEPTUAL TERMINOLOGY

- **Far Right** – an umbrella term used to refer to those to the ideological right of mainstream politics (see Lee, 2015). In this report, Far Right includes both those who are on the extreme right and those who do not meet that threshold yet remain on the 'radical right' of mainstream political beliefs.
- **Conspiracy Theory** – a belief that there are hidden mechanisms for events that are controlled by elites with a sinister goal(s) (Pigden, 2006).

PLATFORM SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY

- **Group (Telegram)** – A set of users in Telegram, normally interested in the same topic. All members can send and receive messages and can invite other members of the group or join via a link.
- **Channel (Telegram)** – Typically, these will have one or a few administrators who control the channel. Only administrators can publish

messages in the channel. An unlimited number of people can subscribe to receive broadcast messages from the administrator(s).

- **Accounts** – Either a channel or group on telegram.
- **User(s)** – Individuals operating individual accounts.
- **Forwarding (Telegram)** – “An account can forward an original message (published by another account) to a different account; similar to email forwarding and the retweet action in X (formally Twitter). The content of a forwarded message and the original message are the same, but the forwarded message includes the name and profile link of the original content provider” (Dargahi Nobari et al., 2017:2036).
- **Mentioning (Telegram)** – “Accounts in Telegram have a unique username which can be used as a reference to mention an account.” (Dargahi Nobari et al., 2017:2036).

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

This is the Executive Summary taken from the Full Report: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/mapping-influence-between-conspiracy-communities-and-extremist-entities/

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