MACQUARIE
University

Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Macquarie University, Department of Security Studies and Criminology

NSW
GOVERNMENT

PROJECT

The project *Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right Wing Extremists in New South Wales* (NSW) used the systematic mining and analysis of online data to generate evidence-based insights into online right wing extremism (RWE) across the state. Research was conducted between June 2019 and February 2020 into four key areas:

1. What is the nature of the online RWE environment in NSW?
2. How is this movement distributed across NSW?
3. How are themes and narratives framed in different online contexts in order to mobilise support?
4. What level of risk does the online RWE environment pose?

The research areas were framed as broad questions to facilitate wide exploratory research into the online RWE movement in NSW, a milieu that has been little studied. This breadth of scope was considered pertinent in the wake of the March 2019 mass casualty terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, by an attacker originating from NSW.

Academics from Macquarie University and Victoria University partnered to deliver this research. Expertise was provided by All Together Now. Funding was provided by the Department of Communities and Justice (NSW).

KEY OUTCOMES

1. Levels of Risk

Online RWE communities are complex, dynamic and fluid. They rely on a commitment to shared narratives around 'white identity under threat.' These communities are highly social.

We identified two distinct yet connected levels of risk:
A creeping threat: Networks and content that challenge the fundamental principles of pluralistic liberal democracy.
The risk of violent actors: A smaller yet distinct risk of individuals that advocate and/or support the use of violence as a tactic to achieve an ideological end.

2. New South Wales Environment

RWE individuals and networks exist across NSW.

American and to a lesser degree Australian issues are important. NSW specific issues are much less prevalent.

3. Online RWE Communities

RWE communities examined for this project are primarily defined by networks of individuals as opposed to formal groups.

Although some diversity exists in the demographic, these individuals are mostly male and young (under 35).

4. Classifications of social media platforms

Despite being hateful and extreme, online RWE communities are spaces of sociability for users, where social networks are created and maintained around shared values and norms. They engender positive experiences for those involved in them.

RWE communities use multiple social media platforms. We categorise Platforms from low to high risk in relation to the strength of the echo chamber and level of platform moderation.

The communities on higher risk platforms tend to be smaller than those on lower risk platforms. We observed movement over time to higher risk platforms.

5. Themes & Frames

The central theme of 'white identity under threat' is framed in many ways. These frames focus on the delegitimisation of government and the dehumanisation of others.

As users move towards higher risk platforms content and interactions become more extreme and explicitly violent.

RIGHT WING EXTREMISM

This report adopts the term RWE to denote communities and individuals committed to an extreme social, political, or ideological position that is pro-white identity (the 'in-group'), and actively suspicious of non-white others (the 'out-group'). It is characterised by individuals, groups, and ideologies that reject the principles of democracy for all and demand a commitment to dehumanising and/or hostile actions against out-groups. RWE can be used as an umbrella phrase which incorporates a collection of terms that have been adopted internationally to describe this diverse social movement, including the 'far right', 'alt right', 'extreme right' etc. RWE communities actively misappropriate the language of conservative, right wing political philosophy to reject democratic norms and values.

LEVELS OF RISK

CREEPING THREAT: Many RWE communities online are not explicitly violent. However, they pose a 'creeping threat' to liberal democracy. This environment is characterised by narratives that challenge the fundamentals of pluralist liberal democracy through exclusivist appeals to race, ethnicity, nation, and gender. These are highly social environments with users expressing beliefs through appeals to critical thinking, a rejection of political correctness, the posing of alternative conspiracy theory, and the use of humour and satire that is designed to shock and offend.

RISK OF VIOLENT ACTORS: Within RWE communities there are individuals that advocate the use of violence as a tactic for expressing political grievances. RWE communities on more 'high risk' platforms engaged in increasingly radical and extreme rhetoric, including narratives supporting violence. Separating examples of bragging, irony, and fantasy from real capability and intent is problematic. This makes identifying potential violent actors from within these communities by their posts alone difficult.

NEW SOUTH WALES ENVIRONMENT

RWE communities in NSW have a high interest in real world issues and events occurring in America and Australia. Hashtags are used on social media to draw attention to, organise, and promote user content. Hashtag frequency analysis provides insights into popular narratives with #MAGA and #auspol occurring in the top five hashtags in posts by Twitter and Gab users. This finding highlights the prevalence of narratives focused on American and Australian real-world issues and events.

ONLINE RWE COMMUNITIES

NSW has a long history of RWE and has been the centre of issues that have contributed to and exacerbated the growth of these communities, for example the Cronulla Riots and the backlash following the Martin Place Siege. Most RWE groups that have formed over the past decade have done so in the state of Victoria. Many of these groups have 'chapters' or associated groups in NSW and maintain an online presence. In NSW, RWE communities consist of networks of socially connected individuals that engage and share content across diverse media platforms.

We identified a trend towards mostly male and young (under 35) users. This is not to say that these communities are completely homogeneous, but that other demographics appear to be in a minority when compared to young males.

CLASSIFICATIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Online RWE communities are highly social spaces. We categorise social media platforms from low to high risk in relation to the strength of the echo chamber and level of platform moderation. Movement from low to high risk platforms exposes users to increasingly smaller communities with less access to different content/opinions reflecting the potential for an increasingly extremist social identity.

THEMES AND FRAMES

WHITE IDENTITY UNDER THREAT: The theme of white identity under threat was observed in all RWE communities. This narrative unifies RWE communities throughout Australia, North America, and Europe. It provides a transnational focus and identity for otherwise complex, diverse, and fluid communities. This singular theme is expressed in multiple ways.

DELEGITIMISATION OF GOVERNMENTS AND THE DEHUMANISATION OF OTHERS: On low-risk platforms (Twitter), 'Trumpism' and 'deep-state' conspiracy theories (e.g. #QAnon) provide users with an opportunity to engage with content that references the 'defence' of a 'white identity under threat' without violating platform moderation policies. On high-risk platforms (Gab) this theme is framed in far more explicit terms that consistently draw on Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and more. Across the 'chan' messaging boards these take on a stronger extremity of expression including a willingness to explore and speculate about the need for (at times violent) action.

ISSUES FOR FUTURE CONSIDERATION

- Awareness raising for key stakeholders across different levels of government and civil society about the revolutionary and anti-social agenda of RWE communities.
- Building awareness about the civic underpinnings of representative liberal democracy and the threat that RWE poses.
- Expanding current CVE infrastructure provided by the NSW government to individuals and communities vulnerable to right wing extremism.
- Local government is well positioned to deliver programs in rural communities impacted by RWE.
- Upskilling front-line workers to recognise the risks associated with RWE; and providing pathways into CVE intervention programs for individuals identified as being at-risk.