



CRIS

Centre for Resilient
and Inclusive Societies

crisconsortium.org

@CRISconsortium

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

27 NOVEMBER 2020

NEW RESEARCH: World events including COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter are fuelling far-right and far-left mobilisation on Facebook in Australia

The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies ([CRIS](https://www.crisconsortium.org)) is releasing its first report in a series analysing the online interactions between far-right and far-left groups in Victoria, Australia. The study shows that COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter (BLM) were key rallying points for both the far-right and far-left on Facebook, with radically opposed interpretation of these events. In particular, BLM provided extensive opportunities for the far-right to mobilise against the far-left and vice versa.

The Interplay between Australia's Political Fringes on the Right and Left - Online Messaging on Facebook by Cécile Guerin, Jacob Davey, Mario Peucker and Thomas J. Fisher is based on an analysis of the activities of 43 far-right and 31 far-left Facebook pages, as well as seven far-right and two far-left public groups, from January to July 2020.

Key findings

- **Anti-right mobilisation was more central to the far-left than the opposite, contributing to 17% of publications in far-left pages and groups** (as opposed to 7% of posts about the far-left in far-right pages and groups). 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 on Facebook 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
- **Far-right and far-left Facebook pages and groups saw a notable increase in activity in June, coinciding with worldwide anti-racist protests and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.** While the far-right attempted to discredit the movement, the far-left focused on police violence. 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, showing that world events led to increased antagonistic mobilisation between far-right and far-left.
- **Far-right groups were more likely to promote violence than far-left groups.** Our analysis did not identify any direct calls for violence against the far-right in far-left groups, but identified several calls for violence in Facebook comments on far-right pages and groups, highlighting how the far-right seems to represent a greater security risk than the far-left.
- **China was a rallying topic for the far-right,** with popular posts expressing hostility towards China and Chinese people. Increased discussion about China





CRIS

Centre for Resilient
and Inclusive Societies

crisconsortium.org

@CRISconsortium

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. 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.

Cécile Guerin, Research & Policy Coordinator at ISD, said:

"COVID-19 and anti-racist protests have fuelled growing far-right and far-left activity online. Our analysis shows the far-right has used the pandemic to promote anti-minority sentiment and blame specific communities for the spread of the virus. The far-right is also more likely to promote violence against the far-left than vice-versa. This has implications for the country's security and social cohesion, highlighting the need for increased local and national responses to far-right mobilisation."

Mario Peucker, Senior Research Fellow at Victoria University said:

"From the devastating bushfires to the pandemic crisis and the BLM protests, all these events provided ample opportunities for the radical fringes on the left and right of the political spectrum to get their message out. Although a strong anti-government stance was prevalent across both movements, these messages couldn't have been more different – and they remained true to the movements' respective ideologies. While the far-right pushed a nationalist, anti-egalitarian agenda, the left advocated against capitalism and for racial and climate justice and solidarity for workers and other vulnerable groups."

Contact

Cécile Guerin, ISD: cgu@isdglobal.org

Mario Peucker, Victoria University: Mario.Peucker@vu.edu.au

The study is part of a series produced by the CRIS research and program Stream: "Dynamics of Violent Extremism." Over the next few months, we will produce three more briefings examining the online mobilisation of far-right and far-left actors in Australia, across different mainstream and fringe online platforms.

