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RECIPROCAL DYNAMICS BETWEEN AUSTRALIA'S POLITICAL FRINGES ON TWITTER

Cécile Simmons, Joshua Farrell-Molloy,
Jacob Davey, Mario Peucker



ABOUT THIS SERIES

This paper is the third in a series analysing the interplay between the far right and far left in the state of Victoria, Australia, across a range of social media platforms. The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS) produces this series as part of its research 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 (VU).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia, and in particular Victoria, saw several violent clashes between far-right protesters and anti-fascist counter-protesters from radical left groups during a number of street demonstrations between 2015 and 2019. Since then, and in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of violence between these groups has remained relatively low, especially in comparison to the cumulative violence between far-left and far-right activists in the USA. Nonetheless, mobilisation by these political fringes has continued online, with analysis by ISD and VU confirming surges in such activity on Facebook and Gab in 2020.

Considering the violent clashes between the far left and far right seen in recent years in Australia, and the surges in the online mobilisation of extremists documented over the course of the pandemic, it is important to better understand the potential risks this activity poses. In the USA, far-left anti-fascist activity was controversially branded a potential terrorist threat by the Trump administration,¹ while far-right extremism has surged globally. What can the activity in Australia tell us about any future threat of violence and disorder in the country?

In their submission to the recent Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into extremist movements and radicalism in Australia, Victoria Police claimed that the '[right-wing extremist] threat does not exist in a vacuum and is directly influenced by a symbiotic relationship with the threat of left wing extremism', loosely referring to global 'protest movements' and maintaining that parts of the Victorian far left are 'mimicking overseas based LWE [Left-Wing Extremist] movements (such as ANTIFA)'.² However, this view does not appear to be universal. In contrast to Victoria Police, Australia's federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies do not seem to consider far-left groups to be part of the current threat landscape. In their submissions to the same committee, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) did not mention the far left, while the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) stated: 'Left-wing extremism is not currently prominent in Australia.'³

While there appears to be a general consensus about the threat of far-right extremism and violence, assessments of far-left mobilisation and its interplay with far-right extremism are more contested and inconclusive. This is at least partly due to a lack of empirical research on these phenomena. The research led by ISD and VU within CRIS contributes to addressing this empirical gap by analysing online activity – specifically seeking to explore whether Australia's far left poses a material security risk, and analysing the reciprocal nature of far-left and far-right activity and the potential for cumulative radicalisation or violence.

This report presents analysis of patterns of far-right and far-left mobilisation based on examining the behaviour of and interplay between two networks of accounts on Twitter. To help build an understanding of these reciprocal dynamics, researchers at ISD and VU analysed 404,375 tweets produced by a sample of 151 far-left and 75 far-right Australian Twitter accounts since 2016. This included examining the interactions between the two sets of actors, differences and commonalities in their online behaviours, and key topics of mobilisation.

The analysis found that conversation about each side's respective political opponents was a key driver in both far-right and far-left mobilisation on Twitter and that both sets of actors used oppositional narratives as part of their online activities, suggesting that surges in activity by one political fringe will likely inspire counter-mobilisation. A deeper analysis of this activity suggests that while the Australian far right frequently engages in hateful and divisive activity online, the far left does not appear to do this on a comparable scale. However, we did identify a small number of tweets produced by far-left accounts that can be considered antisemitic according to some but not other definitions of antisemitism.⁴

Overall, our findings indicate that commentary describing the far left as a threat that is equivalent to the far right is inaccurate. Instead, our analysis suggests that effective policing and online moderation of far-right extremism could limit the pronounced harmful online activity of far-right actors, and also have the potential knock-on effect of reducing counter-mobilisation by the left.

KEY FINDINGS

We found a strong dynamic of reciprocal activity in both far-left and far-right conversation on Twitter. Discussion about political opponents was identified as a key mobilising topic for both the far right and far left, showing that oppositional narratives built around the 'other side' of the political spectrum are key drivers of conversation on Twitter.

The far right and far left draw on distinctive media ecosystems, with the far right favouring hyper-partisan sources. Accounts from the far-left and far-right networks we analysed engaged with very different media accounts and sources. Far-left Twitter users are more likely to engage with sources with a less pronounced political affiliation, such as public broadcaster ABC News, while far-right users primarily favoured hyper-partisan and radical ideological sources.

Far-right accounts were more likely to engage in conspiratorial thinking about the COVID-19 pandemic. While COVID-19 appeared as a significant topic of discussion for both sets of actors, far-right accounts primarily discussed vaccine scepticism and anti-mask and lockdown rhetoric, pinned the blame for outbreaks on groups such as protesters and immigrants, and adopted an anti-China stance. Conversely, far-left accounts discussed the social and economic impact of the pandemic on employees and how inequalities exacerbated the impact of both the pandemic and the imposition of government restrictions.

Far-right Twitter activity focused heavily on hostile discussion of marginalised communities, in particular promoting anti-trans narratives, as well as international affairs with a focus on China and US politics. By contrast, the far left focused largely on economic and social justice, including on workers' rights, institutional racism and police violence. We identified few instances of hostile narratives on the far left, with the exception of discussion about police violence, where users expressed antipathy to police in the wake of the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020.

We identified a small number of far-left tweets using language that met the IHRA's working definition of antisemitism. Out of a sample of 257 far-left tweets mentioning Israel, we identified a very small number (17 or 6%) that compare the activity of the Israeli state with Nazi Germany. Under some definitions of antisemitism, this could be seen as a form of coded antisemitism. Given the limited scale of this study, it is important that the extent and nature of this concerning activity is analysed further.

INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines the findings from an analysis of far-right and far-left Twitter ecosystems in Australia since 2016, highlighting in particular how these ecosystems have evolved in 2020 and 2021. It examines how the far right and far left interact with and refer to each other online, and identifies salient topics of conversation in both groups. In order to examine the far-right and far-left online ecosystems in Australia, researchers at ISD and VU used established definitions of the far right and far left (see Glossary) to identify two distinct networks of 75 far-right and 151 far-left Twitter users (see Methodology).

It is important to note that this briefing does not seek to draw any equivalences between the ideologies or activities of the far right and the far left. Instead, it seeks to understand how they interact online and discuss each other, as well as identify their online mobilisation patterns. By analysing the most salient topics of discussion, the research aims to identify key issues of interest for both sets of actors and understand how discussion about the 'other side' resonates within the broader discourse of the Australian political fringes. In order to perform this analysis, researchers used a bespoke machine learning tool (Method52) developed by the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM) at the University of Sussex in the UK and combined natural language processing (NLP) technology and quantitative data gathered via Method52 with a qualitative analysis (see Methodology for further details).

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THE
RESEARCH
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Examining how far-right and far-left actors talk about each other online is not only crucial in understanding the narratives that are central to their online mobilisation, it is also important in understanding some of the drivers behind confrontations that take place offline. The re-emergence of Australia's far right in the mid-2010s manifested in an unprecedented wave of far-right street protests across the country, in particular in Victoria.⁵ This offline mobilisation quickly triggered a response from anti-racist and anti-fascist networks, most of them associated with far-left groups, which frequently organised counter-protests that would usually outnumber the far-right demonstrations and often resulted in clashes between the opposing groups.

While most of these far-right events between 2015 and 2019 were framed as anti-Muslim, anti-crime or as general 'national pride' protests, attacks on the left-wing counter-protesters often played an important mobilising role. In December 2019, Melbourne man Phillip Galea, who had been affiliated with several of these far-right groups, was sentenced to 12 years in prison for planning to attack sites or persons associated with left-wing ideology,⁶ including a socialist centre and a trade union hall and for preparing a manual aimed at helping like-minded people undertake acts of violence against Muslims and 'lefties'. This 2019 verdict was the first time that a person on the far right was convicted of terrorism-related charges in Australia.

Research on far-right mobilisation online has consistently highlighted that anti-left narratives have played an important role. According to a 2018 study analysing activity on 12 far-right Facebook accounts between 2015 and 2017, anti-left opposition was in the top five most prominent topics.⁷ The first ISD and VU report in this CRIS research series analysed almost 19,000 Facebook posts on 48 far-right pages and groups during the first seven months of 2020 and found that 7% of all posts referred to the far left, including some that contained calls for violent action against the far left.⁸ The second ISD and VU report in this CRIS research series,⁹ examining far-right activity on Gab, similarly identified calls for violence against the far left as well as minority communities.

This third CRIS research briefing examines far-right and far-left messaging, and the reciprocal dynamics between the two groups, on Twitter. This is one of Australia's most popular social media sites, used by over 30% of adults (as of May 2021), and still growing, with 500,000 new users each year.¹⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic, global anti-racist protests and other world events, ranging from the US presidential elections to the sporadic escalations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, have provided fertile ground for political mobilisation and confrontation online. The pandemic has also sparked anti-lockdown protests globally, including in Australia, with far-right activists featuring prominently.¹¹ Understanding how political fringes interact on social media is crucial in gauging the potential threat of future extremist violence.

DEFINITIONS

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 the far right. We refer to the well-established conceptualisations put forward by Dutch political scientist and expert on right-wing extremism Cas Mudde¹² and UK-based academic Elisabeth Carter.¹³ Both identify the extreme right as typically exhibiting several of the following characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy, strong-state advocacy and authoritarianism. We use the generic umbrella term far right to cover both radical and extreme right-wing groups, their 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 also characterised 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, and the scholarship on radical or far-left actions and groups in contemporary Western societies is much less developed than research on the far right.¹⁴ Following Luke March and Mudde,¹⁵ and echoing the differentiation of the far right, we propose making a distinction between left-wing radicalism and extremism. As on the far right, far-left extremists are anti-democratic, while radicals 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 radically egalitarian, anti-fascist agenda, typically with an internationalist outlook.¹⁶ Radical left groups can sometimes be identified by the use of certain symbols (e.g. Antifa flag, three arrows). While, in general, far-left groups may or may not regard violence, especially against their political opponents (e.g. perceived representatives of fascism and capitalism), as a legitimate tool in the pursuit of their political agenda, there is currently no evidence that Australia's far left poses a significant security threat.¹⁷

METHODOLOGY

NETWORK CREATION

To conduct the analysis, researchers at ISD and VU established a network of far-left and far-right accounts. Through digital ethnographic research, we identified 50 far-left and 57 far-right Twitter accounts (*seed accounts*) self-reportedly located in Australia. Using ISD's in-house data analysis platform, Method52, co-developed by CASM at the University of Sussex in the UK, we collected a list of all of these accounts' followers. Through this process, we identified 3,685 users following far-left seed accounts and 1,789 users following far-right seed accounts. Of accounts which were following 10 or more of the seed accounts, 170 on the far left and 49 on the far right were manually analysed by researchers to assess their relevance to our definitions of the far right and far left. Accounts which met the definition were added to the original list, resulting in a further 71 far-left and 16 far-right accounts.

The expanded account list was used to perform further account identification. We collected all followers of the accounts on the expanded list and manually analysed those following 15 or more accounts on the expanded list. Accounts which met our working definitions of the far right and far left were added to the list, resulting in a final network of 151 far-left and 75 far-right accounts. We then extracted content produced by these accounts up to their 3,000 most recent tweets. In total, this provided us with 262,268 tweets produced by the far left and 142,107 tweets produced by the far right, sent between January 2016 and May 2021.

Table 1 Temporal split of far-left tweets

FAR-LEFT







2021		43%
2020		33%
BEFORE 2020		24%

Table 2 Temporal split of far-right tweets

FAR-RIGHT

2021		79%
2020		17%
BEFORE 2020		4%

The majority of these tweets were produced by the accounts in 2020 and 2021, with more than 75% of those published by the far left being produced since the beginning of 2020, and more than 95% of those by the far right appearing in the same period. This is a reflection of our data gathering as we gathered the most recent 3,000 tweets produced by each account, suggesting that the far right are more active on Twitter than the far left. Additionally, this indicates that the analysis that follows largely provides an accurate reflection of the pattern of online activities in 2020 and 2021.

ANALYSIS

In order to understand the reciprocal dynamics between far-left and far-right Twitter accounts in Australia, we sought to analyse interactions between accounts on both fringes of the political spectrum, potential commonalities and differences in mobilisation patterns and the most salient topics of discussion. Researchers analysed the dataset of 404,375 tweets using both qualitative and quantitative methods. ISD's data analysis platform Method52 allowed us to perform a language analysis and identify keywords commonly used by both sets of actors, as well as to determine which domains are most commonly referenced by them, thereby shedding light on the characteristics of mobilisation patterns on both sides of the political spectrum. To perform a deeper analysis of key topics of discussion among both sets of actors, we used unstructured NLP algorithms (see Topic Analysis).



ISD'S DATA
ANALYSIS
PLATFORM
METHOD52
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TO PERFORM
A LANGUAGE
ANALYSIS AND
IDENTIFY
KEYWORDS
COMMONLY
USED



COMMONALITIES IN LANGUAGE USED ONLINE

In order to examine potential commonalities and differences in mobilisation patterns on each side of the ideological spectrum, we conducted an analysis of the language used by both sets of Twitter accounts. To analyse key linguistic features of the far-right and far-left accounts, we compared the tweets produced by both sets of accounts in a randomly selected sample of 10,000 tweets. Through this process, we identified the terms which are most commonly used by both far-right and far-left Twitter users in our network. We selected the top 20 keywords most commonly used by both the far-right and far-left Twitter accounts compared to a corpus of mainstream media text on Twitter during the period of study.

The terms most commonly used by both far-right and far-left actors related to far-left and far-right politics, with terms such as 'Marxist', 'socialists', 'leftists', 'communists' and 'soviet', and 'nationalist', 'nationalists' and 'patriot' being used respectively. This highlights how the use of politically loaded, oppositional language relating to the other side of the political spectrum is the area of greatest commonality between far-left and far-right discussion online, demonstrating the importance of reciprocal dynamics in driving the Australian political fringes online.

Table 3 List of keywords most commonly used by both far-right and far-left users

KEYWORDS

avi	miilo
chauvin	nationalism
communists	nationalist
easter	nationalists
fascists	patriot
immigrants	realdonaldtrump
isis	riots
leftists	socialists
marxism	soviet
marxist	

We qualitatively analysed a random sample of 20 tweets corresponding to each keyword in order to understand how these keywords were used by both sets of actors. The size of the sample analysed allowed researchers to draw observational insights from the data. It is worth noting, however, that the sample analysed is not reflective of the full dataset. In the sample analysed, terms such as 'Marxist' and 'socialists' were commonly used by far-left actors to refer to left-wing politics. Far-right Twitter users frequently used the term 'patriot' to refer to politically like-minded individuals, while 'nationalist' was primarily used by far-left Twitter users to refer pejoratively to individuals and groups perceived as being on the far right and to far-right politics in general. The term 'soviet' was used by far-left and far-right users alike, the former using the term for historical references, and the latter as a pejorative description of individuals and groups perceived as being far left.

ANALYSIS OF DOMAINS AND MENTIONS

To gain additional insights into the broader information ecosystems in which far-right and far-left Twitter users operate, we analysed the domains (URLs) most frequently linked to by far-right and far-left Twitter users respectively, as well as the Twitter accounts most frequently mentioned by each set of users.

Table 4 Domains most commonly mentioned by far-left users

DOMAIN MENTIONED BY FAR-LEFT USERS	NUMBER OF MENTIONS
PBS.TWIMG.COM ¹⁸	39,644
TWITTER.COM	24,357
FACEBOOK.COM	4,950
YOUTUBE.COM	1,951
THEGUARDIAN.COM	1,234
GREENLEFT.ORG.AU	878
ABC.NET.AU	660
THEAGE.COM.AU	572
SMH.COM.AU	382
SBS.COM.AU	246

Table 5 Domains most commonly mentioned by far-right users

DOMAIN MENTIONED BY FAR-RIGHT USERS	NUMBER OF MENTIONS
PBS.TWIMG.COM	41,521
TWITTER.COM	13,212
THEUNSHACKLED.NET	2,702
YOUTUBE.COM	875
IS.GD	375
DAILYMAIL.CO.UK	357
NEWS.COM.AU	197
INFOWARS.COM	138
ABC.NET.AU	99
TWITCH.TV	74

The analysis of the top 10 domains most commonly linked to in each network showed a strong political divide and shed light on the different external sources employed by far-right and far-left Twitter users to support their online activities. Both far-right and far-left users linked to URLs of social media platforms, which likely contained ideologically aligned content, but they also linked to news outlets which are strongly divided along partisan lines.

Far-left Twitter users referenced domains belonging to left-leaning media outlets such as The Guardian, as well as mainstream media sources, including The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), The Age and the public broadcaster ABC, which have a more centrist audience¹⁹ but are also sometimes seen as providing coverage with more progressive leanings. Far-left users in our network also linked to the partisan website Green Left.

In comparison, far-right users engaged with a much greater number of hyper-partisan or highly ideologically right-wing sources, linking to The Unshackled and Alex Jones's InfoWars as well as right-leaning mainstream news outlets such as The Daily Mail. This clear partisan divide highlights the vastly different news sources relied upon by the networks we analysed and the fact that fringe actors relatively rarely engage with news sources associated with their political opponents. The far left's greater number of mentions of more centrist mainstream media sources suggests there is a greater likelihood of them engaging with more politically neutral content than the far right, especially considering far-right users are more likely to link to hyper-partisan outlets.

In addition to analysing the domains which were most commonly linked to by our far-right and far-left networks, we also analysed the accounts which these users most frequently mentioned.

Table 6 Accounts most frequently mentioned by far-left users

ACCOUNT MENTIONED BY FAR-LEFT USERS	NUMBER OF MENTIONS
@ABCNEWS	540
ACCOUNT NO LONGER ON TWITTER AS OF SEPTEMBER 2021	485
SECRETARY OF THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF TRADE UNIONS	370
FORMER ABC JOURNALIST	356
@ALBOMP (LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY)	352
PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL WITH A LEFT-WING PERSPECTIVE	320
@SCOTTMORRISONMP	308
PRIVATE INDIVIDUAL WHOSE POLITICAL AFFILIATION COULD NOT BE ESTABLISHED	305
@THEAGE	299
@DANIELANDREWSMP (AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY ELECTED OFFICIAL)	290

Table 7 Accounts most frequently mentioned by far-right users

ACCOUNT MENTIONED BY FAR-RIGHT USERS	NUMBER OF MENTIONS
SELF-DESCRIBED ANTI-LEFT-WING ACCOUNT	540
ACCOUNT NO LONGER ON TWITTER AS OF SEPTEMBER 2021	485
SELF-DESCRIBED ANTI-GLOBALIST AND ANTI-COMMUNIST ACCOUNT	370
INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNT LINKED TO AN ANTI-LOCKDOWN BLOG	356
@CRAIGKELLYMP	352
INDIVIDUAL ACCOUNT WITH NO CLEAR POLITICAL AFFILIATION	320
@SKYNEWSAUST	308
SELF-DESCRIBED ARMY VETERAN WHO POSTS FAR-RIGHT EXTREMIST CONTENT	305
@SCOTTMORRISONMP	299
FAR-RIGHT COLUMNIST	290

The accounts most frequently mentioned by far-right and far-left users were strongly divided along partisan lines. While both far-right and far-left users frequently mentioned Scott Morrison due to his political prominence, there was no further overlap in the most commonly mentioned accounts.

Far-left accounts mentioned mainstream media platforms associated with progressive coverage, including ABC and The Age, as well as progressive elected politicians and public figures, including Victoria Premier Daniel Andrews, Labor Party Leader Anthony Albanese and the Secretary of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, reflecting a pattern already noted above in relation to the domains most commonly mentioned by far-left users.

The nature of the accounts most often mentioned by far-right users seemed to reflect stronger engagement with highly partisan sources, including accounts with clear far-right leanings. This suggests that these users are more likely to engage with influential accounts that promote content which aligns with their own broader worldview.

TOPIC ANALYSIS

To identify the most salient topics of discussion in the dataset, we conducted a topic-modelling exercise using NLP classifiers. We applied a process known as 'clustering' or 'topic discovery', which is an unsupervised computational technique that allows researchers to identify key topics within a dataset while avoiding introducing potential unconscious biases into the analysis. We ran four rounds of NLP classifier analysis, organising language in the dataset into 40 lists associated with common themes of discussion. These lists were analysed qualitatively to identify the most salient topics of conversation, which are presented below:

Table 8 Topics discussed by far-left and far-right users respectively

FAR-RIGHT TOPICS	FAR-LEFT TOPICS
Race	Institutional racism
The LGBTQ+ community	The police
The left	The far-right
COVID-19	COVID-19
China	Anti-capitalism
US politics	Workers' rights
	Protests

¹ There are contested definitions of what constitutes antisemitism. For example, [the IHRA definition of antisemitism](#) is a legally non-binding working definition designed to build consensus around what antisemitism is. However, the IHRA definition is not universally recognized and adopted, and has also been contested by a number of academics and organisations. In response to this, alternative definitions have been promoted such as the [Jerusalem Definition](#), which has similarly been contested by a number of organisations. CRIS does not promote one definition of antisemitism over another, and accordingly this report highlights when content reaches the threshold of antisemitism as laid out in a particular definition.

Researchers generated a list of keywords associated with each topic, producing corresponding samples of tweets. In order to understand how these topics were discussed by the accounts in our dataset, we qualitatively analysed a random sample of 50 tweets representing each topic. The far right shared divisive narratives about political opponents and minorities, focusing on the latter's perceived infringement on Australian society and the alleged persecution of white Australians and traditional families. Far-right users also frequently engaged with COVID-19 conspiracy theories and anti-Chinese narratives. The far left, by contrast, focused largely on discussion of social issues, including the social and economic impacts of COVID-19. Dehumanising language targeting sexual and ethnic minorities was identified in the far-right dataset. While our researchers' analysis did not identify examples of violent rhetoric in the sample tweets produced by far-left users, individual examples of far-left tweets meet the criteria of antisemitism according to the the IHRA working definition, but would not be considered antisemitic according to other definitions of antisemitism such as the Jerusalem Declaration.¹

KEY TOPICS OF DISCUSSION IN THE FAR-RIGHT DATASET

Race

The sample of far-right posts related to race predominantly condemned multiculturalism and immigration in Australia and alleged anti-white agendas. A strong anti-Muslim theme also emerged during pro-Palestinian protests in the wake of the May 2021 Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with users comparing pro-Palestinian protesters to fascists, Islamists and supporters of Sharia law. Other narratives included comments about the alleged naivety of the 'socialist left' and Aboriginal activists who expressed solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

Posts also referenced Muslims and immigration in the UK, blaming open immigration policies and the EU for problems in the country and highlighting the UK as a warning about the direction in which Australia could be heading in the future. There were also multiple references to perceived anti-white agendas in the media and in the Australian education system, sometimes pointing to the situation in other countries.

The topic of 'black on white' crime also featured prominently. For example, users shared content alleging cases of white people being assaulted in the US during the unrest related to George Floyd's killing, discussed high crime among black communities, or referenced white people being murdered by non-white people.

The LGBTQ+ community

Discussions surrounding the LGBTQ+ community often contained anti-trans hate speech and focused on the alleged influence of hidden pro-LGBTQ+ agendas, particularly targeting children. Members of the LGBTQ+ community on Twitter were often singled out for abuse. A prominent narrative characterised LGBTQ+ people as suffering from mental illness. Twitter users with pronouns in their bio were also subjected to mockery by far-right accounts, and multiple links were drawn between the LGBTQ+ community and paedophilia alongside the promotion of narratives that the Australian government, media and schools were all supporting paedophilia.

Other narratives included the mistreatment of gay people by Muslim countries. Users shared stories of persecution of gay people in Muslim countries and labelled Islam 'the most anti-gay cult in the world', using this narrative to highlight the hypocrisy of leftists protesting in solidarity with Palestine during the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It was also leveraged against left-leaning activists in response to outrage at war crimes allegedly committed by Australian special forces in Afghanistan, with suggestions that the Taliban were committing violence against LGBTQ+ communities.

The left

Tweets related to the left were often critical of institutions perceived as left-wing, such as the mainstream media. Users singled out the public broadcaster ABC in particular for allegedly promoting pro-left propaganda, referring to it as the 'Marxist ABC' or 'socialist, fascist controlled media', with some using the #DefundTheABC hashtag to call for the broadcaster to be stripped of taxpayer funding.

Other narratives about alleged left-wing institutional bias included the sharing of articles and discussions about the teaching of critical race theory, the alleged bias of Twitter's harmful or offensive language policies against non-left-leaning users and the promotion of socialist policies by a range of institutions and actors, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the Labor Party and universities.

COVID-19

Four major themes emerged from our analysis of the sample of tweets related to the COVID-19 pandemic: the wearing of masks, the impact of lockdowns, vaccination, and China's alleged role in the global spread of the virus. The May 2021 recommendation by the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that fully vaccinated individuals no longer needed to wear masks in public was a significant topic of discussion, with the sharing of articles accusing the CDC guidelines of creating a 'caste system'. The topic of impending lockdowns in Victoria and London was also discussed, with narratives often centred on the negative economic impact of lockdowns.

Vaccination issues featured prominently in the messaging around COVID-19. Accounts shared Daily Mail articles about a Brisbane nurse who was hospitalised after receiving the AstraZeneca vaccine and negatively framed an article on RNA treatment for COVID-19 developed by researchers in Queensland. Additionally, tweets contained anti-vaccine content and presented the vaccines as being forced on populations and ineffective in preventing lockdowns. Other tweets were anti-Chinese in nature, focusing on the unproven claim the virus leaked from a lab in China and accusing China of cancelling trade talks with Australia in retaliation for Prime Minister Scott Morrison's calls for an independent investigation into the origins of the virus. There were also several tweets blaming COVID-19 outbreaks on various groups and events in Australia, such as the Labor Party and Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters, and Ramadan and Diwali celebrations.

China

China featured heavily in Australian far-right messaging on Twitter. The scope was broad, ranging across the military and economic expansion of China on the international stage, the alleged increasing influence of China in Australia, authoritarian features of the Chinese state (e.g. the social credit system) and narratives associating China with COVID-19.

Users frequently presented Australia's interests and security as being closely linked to declining US power. Several tweets in this thematic sub-sample mentioned the possibility of war with China over either Taiwan or the South China Sea in the near future, with users discussing the need for Australia to acquire nuclear weapons and construct new naval bases, and lamenting the dependence of Australian defence on outdated submarines, with one user referring to a 'depleted ADF with feminised Generals'.

Victorian State Premier Daniel Andrews was singled out on multiple occasions for his role in the Belt and Road negotiations with Beijing, with users nicknaming him 'red Dan'. Chinese investors' ownership of Australian port infrastructure in Melbourne and Darwin was also heavily featured, alongside the perceived growing influence of the Chinese Communist Party on Australian universities and companies. This narrative of increasing Chinese influence in Australia was often paired with anti-government sentiment and accusations of the government committing treachery and selling out Australians by supporting Chinese investment in the country.

US politics

Four main narratives emerged from our analysis of the sample of 50 tweets published by far-right accounts on US politics. They were strongly anti-Biden and pro-Trump, accused institutions of anti-Trump biases and questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 election. President Biden was portrayed as mentally and physically unfit for the presidency. Users also depicted him as anti-Israel and favoured by Iran and Turkey. Several tweets suggested that Biden was deeply sympathetic to the radical left, quoting his decision to repeal a Trump-instated law against vandalising monuments and the Biden administration's role in allegedly pardoning violent Portland protesters.

In contrast, Trump was portrayed as a rational and effective leader. Tweets focused on perceived biases against Trump in the media, such as the lack of fact checking of Biden's statements, or the perceived hypocrisy of opposition from Democrats against Trump policies that are identical to actions later carried out by Biden, such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

KEY TOPICS OF DISCUSSION IN THE FAR-LEFT DATASET

Institutional racism

Discussions about racism focused on institutionalised racism in society and how it emerges in a variety of everyday situations. Far-left Twitter users challenged stereotypes about people of colour, engaged in debates with other users about race and discussed concepts such as white privilege. The historical and ongoing systematic mistreatment of Aboriginal people and the disproportionately high incarceration rate of Indigenous Australians emerged as widely discussed topics. Other Australia-specific topics included calls for the rejection of 'Australia Day' and the adoption instead of 'Invasion Day' to acknowledge the past and ongoing injustices of Australia's colonial history.

Many tweets referred to BLM protests in the US and in Australia, with several challenging accusations that the rallies were a public health risk, including statements made by PM Scott Morrison: 'According to Morrison, protesting outdoors with a mask is far more dangerous than sharing an overcrowded bus, train, classroom or workspace. No infections have been linked to attendance at BLM protests. But politicians are eager to stifle the BLM movement in Aus.'

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict also emerged as a key topic of discussion within this theme, with far-left Twitter users siding with Palestinians as an oppressed people. In some of the tweets analysed within this thematic sub-sample, Israel was portrayed as racist and an 'apartheid state' which supports other apartheid regimes. One user pointed to allegations of non-consensual delivery of birth control to Ethiopian Jews in Israel as an example of Israel being an ethnonationalist state and guilty of racism towards Africans. Several of these tweets drew comparisons between Israeli policies and historical atrocities, including comparing Israeli policy to that of the Nazis, referring to Israeli settlers as Nazis, and also comparing Israeli policy towards African Jews to 'keep Australia white' policies.

In total, 257 tweets mentioning Israel were found in conversations discussing the topic of institutional racism, of which 17 (6%) made comparisons between Israeli policy and that of the Nazis. These tweets can be considered to be antisemitic under the IHRA working definition of antisemitism, which states that, 'taking into account the overall context... Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis' can be a manifestation of antisemitism.²⁰

The presence of tweets with antisemitic connotations reflects patterns which have been observed in other geographical contexts in relation to left-wing activism. For example, in the UK, the Equality and Human Rights Commission released an investigation into antisemitism in the Labour Party in October 2020, and an uptick in antisemitic activity was observed in the summer of 2021 following an escalation in the conflict between Israel and Palestine.²²

The police

Topics discussed by the Australian far left in regard to policing related mainly to police violence in Australia and the US, as well as increases in police powers as part of government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples of alleged police overreach included concerns raised about Victoria Police allegedly claiming they were 'monitoring Facebook' and police disruption of protests such as BLM mobilisations or protests in support of refugees. Several tweets in this sub-sample argued that the police response to anti-lockdown protests was less aggressive than the policing of other types of demonstrations, including anti-racist protests. Users also referred to Australian victims of alleged police violence and discussed Aboriginal incarceration rates and examples of police brutality against Aboriginal individuals.

Much of the discussion around policing related to the US, and more specifically the summer 2020 protests following the murder of George Floyd. Connections were made between police violence in the US and Australia, mobilising in solidarity with both African American victims of police brutality and Aboriginal communities in Australia ('death in custody'). Overall, discussions by the far left considered policing and police violence to be deeply interlinked with state violence, with the police often regarded as a white supremacist institution.

The far right

Tweets about the far right condemned far-right individuals and groups active in Australia or commented on recent incidents that involved white supremacists and National Socialist groups and their leaders, and the sentencing of Phillip Galea on terrorism-related charges for his plan to attack several premises of left-wing activists.

Some tweets in this sub-sample also referred to the far right in Israel and the US. Far-left Twitter users published and retweeted content related to far-right incidents in the US such as the activities of US-based far-right groups, Trump, or the 6 January Capitol Hill riots. As mentioned above, some commentary carried antisemitic undertones in comparing Israel to Nazi Germany. One tweet described a statement from Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu as 'some Mein Kampf shit'. Other instances bordered on antisemitism, for example drawing comparisons between Zionists and far-right marchers in Charlottesville, who included neo-Nazis. In a tweet sharing a poster for a pro-Israel rally, the Jews Against Fascism account stated anyone attending was 'some kind of variant of a supporter of ethno-nationalism, apartheid, fascism, settler colonialism, and/or ethnic cleansing'. While accusations of apartheid are not necessarily antisemitic, including charges of fascism and ethnonationalism can be considered to bring this close to comparing contemporary Israeli policies to Nazi Germany.

COVID-19

Far-left Twitter users discussing the pandemic broadly supported mask wearing and lockdown restrictions, but were highly critical of alleged inequalities in the enforcement of such restrictions and inequalities leaving some people more vulnerable to the virus than others. Users expressed anger at specific incidents where the restrictions were allegedly enforced by the government unequally, such as the deployment of armed police to patrol working-class communities, or alleged cases of racial profiling, with one user claiming that if you are 'Sudanese, or Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander, you are more likely to be fined for COVID breaches'.

'Rich suburbs' were singled out in allegations of comparatively lax enforcement of the rules and a light police presence, in contrast to poorer areas. Other examples of inequality raised in this sub-sample of tweets revolved around the vulnerability of essential and low-paid workers. Several accounts raised awareness of neglect and ill treatment, highlighting cases of workers being forced to return to work following outbreaks despite wanting a second round of COVID tests, or workers being forced to return to work before test results had been received.

Anti-capitalism

The most prominent theme in the sample of left-wing tweets analysed related to the role of capitalism in hindering progress on climate change, with examples such as: 'Capitalism and the environment can not [sic] coexist' and 'Capitalism cannot go green.' Abolishing capitalism was seen as a 'starting point' in avoiding extinction, with the capitalist economic system understood to be deeply interlinked with the climate crisis. The fossil fuel industry, lobbyists and those in power were the subjects of repeated criticism, and capitalism was understood to be the single most important cause of the current crisis. Tweets also used the #ExtinctionRebellion hashtag to engage with other environmental activist movements and introduce anti-capitalist talking points to the broader climate change movement.

Other issues in society, such as the global pandemic or wealth inequality, were also presented as results of the capitalist system. Users claimed that solving these crises requires the abolition of capitalism and that no resolution can be reached while capitalism exists. Other tweets discussed anti-capitalist strategy and theory. Far-left accounts engaged with other activists, critiqued other movements, and engaged in internal debates with one another about a broad range of topics related to the anti-capitalist struggle, ranging from political literature to personal consumer choices.

Workers' rights

Tweets about workers' rights often supported specific strikes and protests, either by expressing solidarity or calling on people to attend them and providing schedules and locations. Examples included support for the unionising of the gig economy to enable workers (e.g. food delivery riders) to fight for better pay and employment rights. Another specific case referenced and supported by far-left Twitter users was the campaign for better pay and conditions for Amazon and warehouse workers. Users named several Australian businesses with allegedly poor working conditions or pay. There were also multiple discussions about the minimum wage in the US, following President Biden's signing of an executive order raising this to US\$15 an hour.

Broader themes within this topic included the inequalities between the capitalist class and the working class, government unemployment schemes and calls for greater support for unemployed people in Australia in the wake of pandemic-enforced lockdowns. Many tweets highlighted the importance of workers organising themselves and promoted joining unions in order to challenge employers and achieve better pay and working conditions.

Protests

Far-left accounts discussed protests and rallies organised by activists in support of a broad range of left-wing causes, including solidarity with Palestine. Most tweets included calls for action and solidarity: 'Once more, Israel is terrorising the Palestinians. And once more, the Palestinians are inspiring the world with their heroic collective resistance. They need global solidarity. #FreePalestine.' Other tweets called for attendance at these rallies, providing locations and times to encourage supporters. Images from protests were often shared, with some noting increased turnouts following the recent escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: 'Amazing turnout for today's rally for Palestine. Comrades I spoke to think this is the biggest attendance in a decade. Long live the intifada!'

Other causes in this topic included solidarity with striking workers, protests against discrimination and the maltreatment of Aboriginal communities and encouraging participation in Invasion Day protests. Some tweets posted the dates, times and locations of upcoming protests while others simply expressed solidarity and support for events. Far-left users also tweeted mockingly about other protests, such as a pro-life rally held in Brisbane in May 2021.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has shown that far-right and far-left actors on Twitter in Australia are using the social media platform to build oppositional narratives about their political opponents. Discussion about the other side of the political spectrum was instrumental in driving online activity on both the far right and far left during the period of study. Political opponents represented a key topic of conversation on both sides of the ideological spectrum, mirroring findings from previous research about far-right and far-left mobilisation on Facebook.²³ Far-left users condemned the actions of various far-right groups and individuals online, and also associated far-right politics with broader world events such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Far-right users focused their narratives on broader institutions that they deemed to be promoting far-left agendas, such as the mainstream media.

An analysis of the key topics of discussion showed that far-right users not only condemned institutions and individuals they perceived as being on the political left or biased towards the left, they also attacked minority communities. Such online attacks by the far right against political opponents and minorities had already emerged as a key trend in previous analysis of the Facebook platform. Conversely, left-wing users focused on social and economic issues, which also reflected findings from research carried out on Facebook. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict featured as a sub-theme of left-wing discussions, and certain segments drew comparisons between Israel's current policies and those of Nazi Germany. According to the IHRA working definition, 'Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis' constitutes antisemitism';²⁴ when applying other definitions, such as the Jerusalem Declaration, such rhetoric would not meet the

threshold of being considered antisemitic. COVID-19 emerged as a common topic of discussion for the far right and far left, with each set of actors sharing different narratives about the pandemic. This was similar to what researchers had observed on Facebook,²⁵ with far-right users displaying anti-vaccine and anti-lockdown views and blaming the virus on China, while far-left users focused on discussions about economic and social inequalities exacerbated by the virus and condemned the unequal implementation of COVID-19 restrictions across society. Both far-right and far-left users engaged extensively with international events, often referencing examples and events from other countries to support their narratives. While far-left activism has long been associated with such international perspectives, the internationalisation of the far right has only come to attention in recent years. Consequently, it has been the object of increasing investigation, including in ISD and VU's research about reciprocal dynamics between far-right and far-left actors on Facebook.

Finally, we found that far-left Twitter users were more likely to engage with mainstream media sources that demonstrated no strong political affiliation, while far-right users were more likely to link to hyper-partisan or explicitly right-wing sources. This suggests that the far right engages with an atomised media ecosystem and has limited interactions with politically more balanced mainstream media sources, highlighting potential risks of further polarisation and political radicalisation.

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