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# VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM ONLINE IN 2021

## THE YEAR IN REVIEW

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Radicalisation Awareness Network

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## INTRODUCTION

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This report treats developments in the violent extremist and terrorist online scene(s) in the 12-month period from 1 December 2020 to 30 November 2021. It accomplishes this by surveying, describing, and integrating the findings of relevant articles and reports produced by academics, thinktanks, civil society, and governmental organisations; high quality media coverage; and the firsthand experience and primary research of the authors.

The report is divided into three major parts: Part I focuses on the online activities of the extreme right, particularly its European and US variants, Part II on violent forms of jihadism, particularly those linked to the so-called ‘Islamic State’ (hereafter IS), and Part III details the responses of a range of Internet companies and democratic Western governments to malicious online activity over the course of the last 12 months. We conclude by pointing to a range of issues in the violent extremism and terrorism online realm(s) that bear watching in 2022.

Those familiar with previous VOX-Pol Year in Review reports<sup>1</sup> will know that the structuring of these was slightly different, with analysis of violent jihadi activity preceding discussion of extreme right online activity. The March 2019 Christchurch attacks, a series of subsequent attacks in the United States, Germany, and elsewhere, events online and offline around the US Presidential election, and a general uptick in ‘real world’ and extreme right online activity globally during the Covid-19 pandemic have all put violent extreme right (online) activity firmly centre stage however, which is reproduced in the structuring of the present report. This does not necessarily mean that the threat from violent jihadism is diminished, but rather reflects the reason behind the increased focus by a range of relevant actors on the risks posed by unfettered online violent extreme right activity.

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<sup>1</sup> VOX-Pol’s *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2019: The Year in Review* addressed developments in violent extremism and terrorism online from 1 December 2018 to 31 December 2019. It is free-to-access online at [https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol\\_publication/Violent-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Online-in-2019-The-Year-in-Review.pdf](https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Violent-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Online-in-2019-The-Year-in-Review.pdf). Our 2018 *Year in Review* is available at [https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol\\_publication/Year-in-Review-2018.pdf](https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Year-in-Review-2018.pdf). Our 2017 *Year in Review* is available at [https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol\\_publication/YiR-2017\\_Web-Version.pdf](https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/YiR-2017_Web-Version.pdf) and its 2016 equivalent at [http://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol\\_publication/Year-In-Review-WEB.pdf](http://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Year-In-Review-WEB.pdf).

## PART I. RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST AND TERRORIST ONLINE CONTENT AND ACTIVITY IN 2021

Concerns about the political fallout of online extreme right activity, including disinformation and radicalisation, began to receive concerted attention from researchers, journalists, policymakers, and others from 2015. The 15 March, 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack mainstreamed these concerns. The New Zealand mosque attack, in which 51 people died, was especially Internet-centric, including a pre-planned online manifesto distribution strategy and Facebook Live video stream. Subsequent events, including a spate of additional right-wing terrorist attacks,<sup>2</sup> the 2020 US Presidential campaign, and the Covid-19 pandemic and associated health and related measures have ensured that the threat posed by contemporary extreme right (online) activity is now under greater scrutiny than ever

Right-wing extremists—like all extremists—structure their beliefs on the basis that the success and survival of the in-group is inseparable from the negative acts of an out-group and, in turn, they are willing to assume both an offensive and defensive stance in the name of the success and survival of the in-group.<sup>3</sup> Western right-wing extremism may thus be conceptualised as a racially, ethnically, sexually, and/or gender defined nationalism, which is typically framed in terms of white power and/or white identity (i.e., the in-group) that is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by an identified out-group(s), oftentimes a combination of non-whites, Jews, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, members of the LGBTQI+ community,<sup>4</sup> feminists, and/or women.<sup>5</sup> Corrupt political, media, and other elites are often portrayed as championing the out-group(s) to the detriment of the in-group.

The volume and frequency of production of extreme right online content cannot be measured in the same way as that of jihadis, because the extreme right scene is not dominated by a single group or a discernible number of major franchises or groups, as is the case with violent jihadism. Instead, the extreme right is composed of a shifting and complex overlapping of individuals, groups, movements, political parties, and media organs—both online and traditional—espousing, amongst other views, extreme nationalist, National Socialist/Nazi, fascist, white supremacist, accelerationist, and/or so called ‘alt-right’ ideology.

Important to acknowledge too is the difficulty of differentiating users, social media accounts, websites, etc., espousing more traditionally violent extremist views (e.g., Nazi or neo-Nazi) from users who hold more radical populist views around, particularly, anti-immigration and Islam, but that are not violent extremists as such. The emergence—online initially—of communities and movements that can have links to the extreme right landscape such as QAnon and incels have only added to this difficulty, as has the increasing

<sup>2</sup> Including the April 2019 Poway synagogue attack, the August 2019 El Paso Walmart shooting, and the October 2019 Halle shootings.

<sup>3</sup> J. M. Berger. 2018. *Extremism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>4</sup> ‘LGBTQI+’ is a shorthand reference to describe the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer, inter-sex, and other sexual identity-based communities.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens. 2016. ‘Uneasy Alliances: A Look at the Right-Wing Extremist Movement in Canada.’ *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39(9): 819-841.

overlaps between far- and extreme right activity and agitation around anti-Covid measures (e.g., anti-mask, anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine), both online and off.

Given the volume and diversity of right-wing extremist online content and activity, this section focuses on a selection of right-wing terrorist attacks and other relevant online and offline events, content, and activity that stood out in 2021, but also with reference to 2020, due to the exceptional nature of the global pandemic and its impacts. It begins by reviewing right-wing terrorist attacks and directly adjacent events that occurred in the period under review, with a focus on their online aspects. The next sub-section overviews trends in extreme right online narratives, emphasising the core role of Covid-19, but also briefly addressing QAnon. The third and final sub-section identifies a diversity of platforms and other online spaces and services trafficked by extreme right users in 2021.

### RIGHT-WING TERRORISM IN 2021

A serving Belgian soldier, Jürgen Conings, was charged with attempted murder and illegal possession of weapons—thought to be stolen from a military base in Flanders—in a terrorist context after he was connected with threats to kill Belgium’s top pandemic virologist, Marc Van Ranst. Conings had been placed on a terrorism watch list in February 2021 as a “potentially violent extremist.” He spent from mid-May on the run from Belgian police; his decomposed body, which showed signs of a self-inflicted gunshot wound, was found on 20 June.<sup>6</sup>

#### Box 1. Memes: A Short Explanation

Memes are pieces of text, images, videos, or some combination of these, oftentimes humorous, which are copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations, the most successful of which enter into popular cultural consciousness. Image macros, **still images upon which a caption has been digitally superimposed**, are the most common form of meme and are widely circulated across social media platforms.

Hateful far- and extreme right memes often feature **distorted or unflattering images of people of colour, Jewish people, and others overlaid with ‘humorous’ text**. As Siapera *et al.* point out:

In general, **visual elements tend to be recalled faster than audio or text** and retention for images is better and more accurate compared to verbal and textual information. This is important to note here because it implies that **images of hate may be more pernicious than words alone**.<sup>7</sup>

Prior to his death, a Facebook group titled “I love Jürgen Conings” attracted more than 50,000 members. Banned by Facebook, it relocated to the encrypted messaging application Telegram. Posts in the groups praised Conings, including via the use of fascist memes (see Box 1). At least three protests in support of Conings took place between the issuing of a warrant for his arrest and the announcement of his death. One of these coincided with a Brussels protest against Covid-19 measures (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup>

On 16 March eight people were shot and killed and one wounded in a series of attacks at massage parlours in and around Atlanta, Georgia, USA. Six of the eight killed were Asian women, prompting fears that the attack was

<sup>6</sup> Helen Collis. ‘Fugitive Belgian Soldier Jürgen Conings Found Dead.’ *Politico*, 20 June, 2021: <https://www.politico.eu/article/jurgen-conings-dead-fugitive-belgian-soldier-found/>; Evelien Geerts. ‘Jürgen Conings: The Case of a Belgian Soldier on the Run shows How the Pandemic Collides with Far-Right Extremism.’ *The Conversation*, 16 June, 2021: <https://theconversation.com/jurgen-conings-the-case-of-a-belgian-soldier-on-the-run-shows-how-the-pandemic-collides-with-far-right-extremism-162365>.

<sup>7</sup> Eugenia Siapera, Elena Moreo, and Jiang Zhou. 2018. *Hate Track: Tracking and Monitoring Racist Speech Online*. Dublin City University: School of Communications and FuJo, p.34: <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2018/11/HateTrack-Tracking-and-Monitoring-Racist-Hate-Speech-Online.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

racially motivated. However, the attacker, Robert Aaron Long, denied such racial animus once in custody.<sup>9</sup> Rather the suspect informed police that he had a “sexual addiction” and carried out the attacks to remove his “temptation.”<sup>10</sup> The charges laid against him included domestic terrorism. While he pleaded guilty to four of the murders and was sentenced to life without parole, he pleaded not guilty to the terrorism and some other charges, which are yet to be adjudicated, but for which the prosecutor is seeking the death penalty.<sup>11</sup>

While some media coverage attempted to tie this attack to hate, incel, or male supremacist movements,<sup>12</sup> whether this can be considered an act of terrorism was unclear at time of writing. In particular, there did not seem to be any online evidence of the perpetrator’s involvement in either the right-wing extremist or incel scenes.



**Figure 1. Jürgen Conings’ supporters at a protest in Brussels at end of May 2021 (Alamy/Belga News Agency)**

On 6 June, a man deliberately rammed a pickup truck into a family of Muslim Pakistani Canadians in London, Ontario, Canada. Of the five people hit, four were killed and the other, a 9-year-old boy, was seriously injured. While the 20-year-old attacker, Nathan Veltman, was reported in the immediate aftermath of the attack as having no known ties to extremist or terrorist groups, the police ruled that the attack was motivated by anti-Muslim hatred and the attacker was charged with murder and terrorism, representing the first time that

Canada’s anti-terrorism laws were used to prosecute an Islamophobic attack.<sup>13</sup>

While Facebook confirmed to CBC, Canada’s national broadcaster, that it took down his profile, Veltman’s attack appears thus far to be somewhat of an outlier in that reporters could find no traces of relevant online activity.<sup>14</sup> There is a publication ban in effect on any evidence

<sup>9</sup> ‘8 Dead in Atlanta Spa Shootings, With Fears of Anti-Asian Bias’ *The New York Times*, 17 March, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2021/03/17/us/shooting-atlanta-acworth>.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Atlanta Spa Shootings: Georgia Man Pleads Guilty.’ *BBC News*, 27 July, 2021: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-57989425>.

<sup>11</sup> Associated Press. ‘The Atlanta Spa-Shooting Suspect Pleads Not Guilty In 4 Killings.’ *NPR*, 28 September, 2021: <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/28/1041137210/atlanta-spa-shooting-suspect-pleads-not-guilty-robort-aaron-long>.

<sup>12</sup> ‘8 Dead in Atlanta Spa Shootings.’ For more, on the intersections between hate, inceldom, and male supremacy, see Megan Kelly, Alex DiBranco, and Julia R. DeCook. 2021. *Misogynist Incels and Male Supremacism: Overview and Recommendations for Addressing the Threat of Male Supremacist Violence* (Washington DC: New America): <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/misogynist-incels-and-male-supremacism/>.

<sup>13</sup> Jack L. Rozdilsky. ‘The Terrorism Charge Filed in the London Attack is the First of Its Kind in Canada.’ *The Conversation*, 17 June, 2021: <https://theconversation.com/the-terrorism-charge-filed-in-the-london-attack-is-the-first-of-its-kind-in-canada-162739>.

<sup>14</sup> Kate Dubinski and Mark Gollom. ‘What We Know About the Accused in the Fatal Attack on a Muslim Family in London, Ont.’ *CBC News*, 9 June, 2021: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/london/london-murder-suspect-muslim-family-1.6057164>.



presented to the courts in this case however, so there is a possibility that some of that evidence may have been sourced online and therefore be revealed when the ban is lifted.

An attack having both extreme right and Covid-19 connections was the murder of a 20-year-old student in Idar-Oberstein, Germany on 18 September, 2021. The student employee of a petrol station was shot dead by a 49-year-old man who told police that he acted “out of anger” having been denied service for refusing to wear a mask while trying to buy beer. The alleged perpetrator, identified only as Mario N, and who turned himself in the morning after the shooting, told police “that he rejected the measures against the coronavirus.”<sup>15</sup>

Analysis of Mario N’s social media activity, in which he also expressed support for the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) and perpetuated climate denialism, corroborated this. Similar to events in Belgium, the killing was praised in online groups and channels frequented by far-right users and conspiracy theorists, including Germans self-identified as Querdenker or ‘Lateral Thinkers.’ “One less parasite,” read a post noting the victim was a student, while another described the attack as a natural step in the fight against the “Merkel dictatorship,” the website of the German daily newspaper Der Tagesspiegel reported.<sup>16</sup>

At issuance again in 2021 was whether incel violence can accurately be described as terrorism.<sup>17</sup> This discussion arose in the context of Jake Davison shooting dead five people, including his mother and a three-year-old girl, in Plymouth, England on 12 August. The shooting spree ended when Davison turned the gun on himself. This attack differs from the Georgia shootings in that Davison had a history of contributing to incel forums and posting YouTube videos in which he appeared to subscribe to incel ideology, including describing himself as “blackpilled” (see Box 2), but in which he denied being an incel. Initially, UK counterterrorism dismissed classifying the shootings as terrorism,<sup>18</sup> but local police later stated that they might be reclassified as such.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> ‘German Cashier Shooting Linked to Covid-19 Conspiracies.’ *BBC News*, 22 September, 2021: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58635103>; John Silk. ‘Face Mask Killing Sparks Radicalization Fears in Germany.’ *DW.com*, 21 September, 2021: <https://www.dw.com/en/face-mask-killing-sparks-radicalization-fears-in-germany/a-59252877>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* See also, ISD Germany. 2021. *Wie Instagram scheitert, gegen Hetze vorzugehen: Der Fall Idar-Oberstein* (Berlin: ISD): [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ISD\\_kurzreport\\_Instagram-Idar-Oberstein-112021.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/ISD_kurzreport_Instagram-Idar-Oberstein-112021.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Maura Conway. 2018. *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2018: The Year in Review* (Dublin: VOX-Pol): [https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol\\_publication/Year-in-Review-2018.pdf](https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Year-in-Review-2018.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> Lizzie Dearden. ‘Plymouth Shootings Were Not Terror Attack, Senior Police Officer Says.’ *The Independent* (UK), 28 September, 2021: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/plymouth-shootings-incel-terror-attack-b1928366.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Sky News. ‘Plymouth Shootings: Attack Could be Reclassified as Terrorism Over Jake Davison’s “Incel” Links.’ *Sky News*, 17 August, 2021: <https://news.sky.com/story/plymouth-shootings-attack-could-be-reclassified-as-terrorism-over-jake-davisons-incel-links-12383353>. Canada has the highest number of recorded incel attacks; in 2019, Canada’s Security Intelligence Service identified inceldom as a form of violent misogynistic ideological extremism.



**Box 2. Excerpt from Brace's 'A Short Introduction to The Involuntary Celibate Sub-Culture'<sup>20</sup>**

Research has shown that the categorical structure of the incel worldview is a **rigid three-tier, immutable, social hierarchy exclusively based on physical appearance**. Here, a minority of **alpha males (Chads)** and **females (Stacys)** are at the top; a majority of **average-looking betas (Normies)** in the middle; and the **exclusively male and minority group of incels at the bottom**.<sup>21</sup>

In this hierarchy, the out-groups (featuring women as well as alphas and betas) are depicted in an extremely negative way and **dehumanised** through the use of negative adjectives and specific terms, such as “femoids” or “roasties,” in the case of women. Women are also portrayed as only capable of **simple emotions** (chiefly sexual desire) and guided by **anti-social values**, i.e. cheating on their partners or manipulating men for sex or money.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, while incels view themselves at the bottom of their hierarchy, they **consider all men, including themselves, as superior to women**.

This leads to a central tenet of the incel worldview; the notion of “**pillling**”. This is a concept that also features in some elements of far-right ideology and is borrowed from the 1999 film, **The Matrix**. The idea is that an individual can either take the “blue pill” and remain detached from reality and live life in ignorance, or they can take the “**red pill**” and “wake up” to the true nature of the world and accept that social structures like those above exist. Incels have added a third option to this, the “**black pill**”, which builds on the red pill by adding a nihilistic element to it in stating that these social hierarchies are immutable and that nothing can be done about them.

In the aftermath of the attack, Jonathan Hall, the UK’s official Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, said incelism “fits rather uneasily into the way the authorities understand ideologies. It seems part of right-wing terrorism but it is not really. In fact, it is quite separate from it. It is a different sort of ideology.”<sup>23</sup> Others disagree.<sup>24</sup> While, as Brace has pointed out, “the exact nature of this relationship is yet to be examined empirically,” they include, at a minimum, some ideological overlaps, particularly as regards attackers subscribing to both ideologies regularly expressing hate toward women and minorities and both communities exhibiting similar “online sensibilities,” including in their use of memes (see Box 1), notion of ‘pillling’ (see Box 2), etc.<sup>25</sup>

Brace has therefore advised:

[G]iven the evidence currently available, it is perhaps best to view the contemporary far-right not as one coherent ideology but one that is made up of several different “flavours” that share different aspects in their worldview. Perhaps the best way to describe this is as a series of overlapping Venn diagrams, whereby each set is a specific category of the far-right, i.e. white nationalist, neo-Nazi,

<sup>20</sup> Lewys Brace. ‘A Short Introduction to The Involuntary Celibate Sub-Culture.’ CREST, 26 August 2021: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/a-short-introduction-to-the-involuntary-celibate-sub-culture/>.

<sup>21</sup> Stephane Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis Coan. 2019. ‘From “Incel” to “Saint”: Analyzing the Violent Worldview Behind the 2018 Toronto Attack.’ *Terrorism and Political Violence* [Online First].

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Lauren Kent and Hannah Ritchie. ‘Plymouth Shooter Made Misogynist Remarks Echoing the ‘Incel’ Ideology.’ *CNN*, 15 August, 2021: <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/14/uk/plymouth-shooting-incel-jake-davison-profile-intl/index.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Charlotte Littlewood. ‘Incel Violence: Should It Be Considered Terrorism?’ *European Eye on Radicalization*, 25 October, 2021: <https://eeradicalization.com/incel-violence-should-it-be-considered-terrorism/>.

<sup>25</sup> Brace, ‘A Short Introduction to the Involuntary Celibate Sub-Culture.’

militia groups, alt-right, etc. Each set features different aspects of far-right ideology, but not all of them. The incel ideology is one of these sets.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, while there were relatively few unambiguously terrorist extreme right attacks in 2021, there were a number of extreme right-oriented attacks and other events that were considered by researchers, law enforcement, and/or others to fit common definitions of terrorism. Most of the described attacks and other relevant incidents had significant online components, but a not insignificant number (e.g., Atlanta, Ontario) did not appear to.

A series of events that had outsized Internet aspects, including especially in terms of the role of the Internet in identifying those charged and platforms' takedown activity in its aftermath, were those that took place on the US's Capitol Hill on 6 January, 2021. Brace's above-described approach to thinking about the nature of the contemporary extreme right is borne out with respect to these events; the question of what constitutes terrorism also arose in relation to them. For more on whether the events of 6 January constituted terrorism, see Box 3; the roles of the Internet in the Capitol Hill incident are addressed in more detail in the next sub-section.

**Box 3. Were the 6 January Capitol Hill Events Terrorism?**

A question that arose in the immediate aftermath of 6 January was whether these events could be described as terrorism. Despite the existence of a statutory US definition of domestic terrorism,<sup>27</sup> there is no federally chargeable offence of same. Terrorism charges were never on the table therefore, instead those arrested have been charged with everything from misdemeanors or so-called 'petty offences' to felonies (e.g., "corruptly obstructing, influencing, or impeding an official proceeding," using a dangerous weapon, conspiracy).<sup>28</sup> Journalists, researchers, and others nevertheless posed the question of whether the 6 January events met standard definitions of terrorism. Many agreed that some of the activity met the threshold.<sup>29</sup>

Importantly, two of those who used the term 'terrorism' to describe some of the events at the US Capitol on 6 January were the US President and the Director of the FBI. On 7 January, then US President-elect Biden stated "they weren't protesters. Don't dare call them protesters. They were a riotous mob, insurrectionists, domestic terrorists. It's that basic. It's that simple."<sup>30</sup> Former US President Trump-appointed FBI Director Christopher Wray followed-up by saying in congressional testimony on 2 March that "the violence and destruction that we saw that day...that attack, that siege, was criminal behaviour...and it was behaviour that we, the FBI, view as domestic terrorism."<sup>31</sup>

The Role of Online Pre, During, and Post the 6 January Capitol Hill Events

Five months prior to the events of 6 January, 2021, at the US Capitol, somewhat similar events took place at the German Reichstag. On Saturday, 29 August, 2020 a demonstration

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> See section 18 *US Code* § 2331: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2331>.

<sup>28</sup> Roger Parloff. 'What Do—and Will—the Criminal Prosecutions of the Jan. 6 Capitol Rioters Tell Us?' *Lawfare*, 4 November, 2021: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/what-do%E2%80%94and-will%E2%80%94criminal-prosecutions-jan-6-capitol-rioters-tell-us>.

<sup>29</sup> Tanya Mehra and Joana Cook. 'An Attack on the Capitol and Democracy: An Act of Terrorism?' *ICCT Blog*, 11 January, 2021: <https://icct.nl/publication/an-attack-on-the-capitol-and-democracy-an-act-of-terrorism/>.

<sup>30</sup> Lauren Gambino. 'Biden Decries Trump Mob.' *The Guardian*. 7 January, 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/07/joe-biden-trump-mob-domestic-terrorists>.

<sup>31</sup> Alexander Mallin and Luke Barr. 'FBI Director Says Capitol Assault "Domestic Terrorism," No Evidence of Antifa' (with video). *ABC News*, 2 March, 2021: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/fbi-director-testifies-time-capitol-assault/story?id=76187365>.

attracting an estimated 38,000 attendees, including right-wing extremists, against Germany's coronavirus restrictions took place in Berlin. In the evening, a hundreds-strong section of the crowd stormed the German parliament building, with the protesters initially held off from entering by just three police officers. Ahead of the August 2020 demonstration, a number of public Telegram groups had reportedly called for a "storm on Berlin."<sup>32</sup> Some users had allegedly even posted photos of themselves with weapons.<sup>33</sup> In the event, the German police guarding the Reichstag were quickly reinforced and the building was not breached, the US Capitol Police had a different experience, however.

Washington DC's Capitol Hill is a historic residential neighbourhood in Washington DC that is home to the US Congress. On 6 January, 2021 attendees at a 'Save America' protest against false claims of election irregularities were addressed by outgoing US President Trump who stated "[i]f you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore."<sup>34</sup> He encouraged the protesters to march on the US Capitol where a joint session of Congress was taking place to formalise US President-elect Joe Biden's victory.

An unprecedented incident subsequently took place: a section of those present violently and unlawfully entered the US Capitol with a range of weapons, running riot throughout the building, damaging property, looting, and occupying the Senate floor. In front of the Capitol, a mock gallows was constructed and there were calls for the hanging of then-US Vice President Mike Pence, who was overseeing the count inside.<sup>35</sup> The 6 January events resulted in the deaths of four protesters, three from natural causes and a female QAnon supporter who was shot and killed by police as she tried to break into the House chamber. One police officer collapsed and died from a stroke after engaging with the rioters, dozens of others were injured.<sup>36</sup>

The organisation of these events, the events themselves, and post-6 January responses all had significant online components. While this incident took place in the US, numerous aspects of it have resonance in an EU—and wider—context. These include online's role in the run-up to the events; the live streaming of them by participants as they unfolded, including monetisation of these; the key role of especially social media in bringing charges against many of those involved in the events; and the increased takedown activity by major and a panoply of smaller online players post-6 January.

On 19 December, 2020, outgoing US President Donald Trump tweeted a call for his followers to protest in Washington DC on 6 January, the day Electoral College votes were due to be certified by the US Congress and Joe Biden certified as the next US President. "Statistically

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<sup>32</sup> Katrin Bennhold. 'Far-Right Germans Try to Storm Reichstag as Virus Protests Escalate.' *The New York Times*, 31 August, 2020: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/31/world/europe/reichstag-germany-neonazi-coronavirus.html>.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Julia Jacobo. 'This is What Trump Told Supporters Before Many Stormed Capitol Hill' (with video). *ABC News*, 7 January, 2021: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/trump-told-supporters-stormed-capitol-hill/story?id=75110558>.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Clare Jalonick and Lisa Mascaro. 'GOP Blocks Capitol Riot Probe, Displaying Loyalty to Trump.' *Associated Press*, 28 May, 2021: <https://apnews.com/article/michael-pence-donald-trump-capitol-siege-government-and-politics-4798a8617bacf27bbb576a4b805b85d9>.

<sup>36</sup> Kenya Evelyn. 'Capitol Attack: The Five People Who Died.' *The Guardian*, 8 January, 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/08/capitol-attack-police-officer-five-deaths>.

impossible to have lost the 2020 Election,” Trump tweeted; “[b]ig protest in DC on January 6th. Be there, will be wild!” (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2 - Then Outgoing-US President Trump’s 19 December, 2020 Tweet Encouraging Followers to Attend 6 January, 2021 Protest**

coordination—online.<sup>37</sup>

This online engagement and coordination included spreading support for the protest widely online, including via social media, messaging applications, email lists, and websites. Far-right figures in the US Republican party, other far-right figures, and prominent extreme right users threw their weight behind the protest. These included Rep. Paul Gosar (R-Arizona), StopTheSteal.us organiser Ali Alexander, Women for America First co-founder Kylie Jane Kremer, 8chan’s Ron Watkins, and Proud Boy’s leader Enrique Tarrio.<sup>38</sup> The online coordination included organisation of travel to DC, including bus and car caravans from across the US.<sup>39</sup>

Many of those present used social media to advertise their presence at the initial 6 January rally and, crucially, events at the Capitol later in the day. This included posting text, photos, and videos across a diversity of social media platforms and messaging applications, in both public and private groups and channels. Of particular note was the relay of events in real time by some of those involved via livestreaming. In some cases, the streams were monetised through on-platform tipping, in others, streamers encouraged viewers to donate GoFundMe, Patreon, and PayPal. For example, prominent white nationalist Tim Gionet (‘BakedAlaska’) is

On Tuesday and Wednesday, 5 and 6 January, protesters arrived in DC in the thousands; they:

[I]ncluded groups across a spectrum of radicalization: hyperpartisan pro-Trump activists and media outlets; the neo-fascist Proud Boys, a group with chapters committed to racism and the promotion of street violence; unlawful militias from around the country with a high degree of command and control, including the so-called Three Percenters movement; adherents to the collective delusion of QAnon; individuals identifying with the Boogaloo Bois, a loosely organized anti-government group that has called for a second civil war; and ideological fellow travelers of the far-right, who wanted to witness something they believed would be spectacular. Each group overlapped but maintained distinct engagement—and

<sup>37</sup> DFR Lab. 2021. ‘#StopTheSteal: Timeline of Social Media and Extremist Activities Leading to 1/6 Insurrection.’ *JustSecurity*, 10 February, 2021: <https://www.justsecurity.org/74622/stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/>.

<sup>38</sup> See *ibid.* for screenshots of a selection of relevant posts and emails by these and others.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

estimated to have made over US\$2,000 streaming from the Capitol via ‘tips’ left in DLive’s on-platform ‘lemons’ that can be converted into real money.<sup>40</sup>

The events of 6 January resulted in a major wave of takedowns by social media and other Internet companies during, immediately after, and in the months post-6 January. Facebook banned by then formally outgoing US President Trump’s account for 24 hours on 6 January. Facebook followed-up on 7 January with an indefinite ban of a minimum of two weeks.<sup>41</sup> (For more on this and other relevant decisions made by the Facebook Oversight Board in 2021, see sub-section below). On 8 January, 2021 Twitter announced that “[a]fter close review of recent Tweets from the @realDonaldTrump account and the context around them—specifically how they are being received and interpreted on and off Twitter” that it had decided to permanently suspend the account “due to the risk of further incitement of violence.”<sup>42</sup> They followed-up by taking extensive enforcement action against QAnon, as well as other groups and movements shown to have played a role (e.g., Oath Keepers). For example, Facebook reported removal of accounts associated with some 600 “militarized social movements.”<sup>43</sup>

At least partially taking their cue from these, a range of other platforms took action against Donald Trump, the Trump campaign and associates, and a range of other actors involved in the 6 January events. These included Snapchat, TikTok, and Twitch.<sup>44</sup> It was not just social media, messaging applications, and adjacent platforms that took action post-6 January, however. Stripe, a major payment processor, announced that it would no longer process payments for the Trump campaign as a result of the riots.<sup>45</sup> Airbnb also released a statement that they would not allow their site to be used to organise accommodation for those participating in the protests expected to accompany the new US President Joe Biden’s inauguration on 20 January, 2021. They also promised to permanently ban from their platform those who engaged in criminal activity during the 6 January Capitol Hill incident.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Kellen Browning and Taylor Lorenz. ‘Pro-Trump Mob Livestreamed Its Rampage, and Made Money Doing It.’ *The New York Times*, 8 January, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/technology/dlive-capitol-mob.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Guy Rosen and Monika Bickert. ‘Our Response to the Violence in Washington January 6, 2021.’ *Facebook Newsroom*, 7 January, 2021: <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/01/responding-to-the-violence-in-washington-dc/>.

<sup>42</sup> Twitter Inc. ‘Permanent Suspension of @realDonaldTrump.’ *Twitter Blog*, 8 January, 2021: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/topics/company/2020/suspension](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2020/suspension).

<sup>43</sup> Rosen and Bickert, ‘Our Response to the Violence in Washington.’

<sup>44</sup> Brian Heater and Taylor Hatmaker. ‘Twitch Disables Trump’s Channel Until the End of His Term to ‘Minimize Harm’ During Transition.’ *Tech Crunch*, 7 January, 2021: <https://techcrunch.com/2021/01/07/twitch-disables-trumps-channel-over-incendiary-rhetoric/>;

Salvador Rodriguez. ‘Snapchat Will Terminate Trump’s Account on Jan.20.’ *CNBC*, 13 January, 2021:

<https://www.cnb.com/2021/01/13/snapchat-will-ban-trump-on-jan-20.html>; Sarah Perez. ‘TikTok Bans Videos of Trump Inciting Mob, Blocks #stormthecapitol and Other Hashtags.’ *Tech Crunch*, 7 January, 2021: <https://techcrunch.com/2021/01/07/tiktok-bans-videos-of-trump-inciting-mob-blocks-stormthecapitol-and-other-hashtags/>.

<sup>45</sup> AnnaMaria Andriotis, Peter Rudegeair, and Emily Glazer. ‘Stripe Stops Processing Payments for Trump Campaign Website.’ *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 January, 2021: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/stripe-stops-processing-payments-for-trump-campaign-website-11610319116>.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Airbnb Announces “Capitol Safety Plan” for the Inauguration.’ *Airbnb News*, 11 January, 2021: <https://news.airbnb.com/airbnb-announces-capitol-safety-plan-for-the-inauguration/>.

An Internet company that suffered a serious setback arising from the events of 6 January was Parler, which lost approximately half of its weekly traffic between July 2020 and July 2021.<sup>47</sup> The explanation for this is almost certainly Parler being banned from Apple’s and Google’s app stores and suspended by Amazon, their web services provider, in the aftermath of the Capitol’s storming. This was due to what the companies described as Parler’s inadequate handling of violent threats and hateful content encouraging the riot circulated on its platform. Parler’s anxiety to be reinstated in the App Store, where it was the No.1 app when it was taken down on 9 January, shows the sway Apple and other Internet companies have over commercial users of their platforms.<sup>48</sup> While social media companies get the most attention regarding their content moderation practices, companies—sometimes little publicly known—further down the so-called ‘tech stack’ have powerful roles in decisions around online speech, which are oftentimes overlooked.<sup>49</sup>

Parler was readmitted by Apple to their App Store in mid-May 2017, but only after a prolonged series of negotiation with the latter, knockback of their initial request for readmission in March, and deployment of a new AI-powered moderation system. Readmission was based on an undertaking by Parler that posts labeled “hate” by its new moderation system won’t be visible on iPhones or iPads. (Users who view Parler on other smartphones or on the Web will still be able to see posts marked as “hate” by clicking through to them). Parler remains banned by Google’s Play Store—though users can still side-load the app on Android via third party providers, including via Parler’s own site—and is presently suing Amazon for the denial of web services and reinstatement, but is widely thought unlikely to be successful in the courts.<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, a company that benefited directly from the 6 January events was Telegram. Telegram received what its founder, Pavel Durov, called “maybe the largest digital migration in human history” in January 2021,<sup>51</sup> becoming the most downloaded mobile app in the world that month.<sup>52</sup> Contributing to this was an influx of far- and extreme right users. The leader of the Proud Boys—which has since been proscribed as a terrorist organisation by Canada—Enrique Tarrio, sang Telegram’s praises on his Telegram channel: “Welcome, newcomers, to the darkest part of the web. You can be banned for spamming and porn. Everything else is fair game.”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Drew Harwell. ‘Rumble, a YouTube Rival Popular with Conservatives, Will Pay Creators Who “Challenge the Status Quo.”’ *Washington Post*, 12 August, 2021: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/08/12/rumble-video-gabbard-greenwald/>.

<sup>48</sup> Kim Lyons. ‘Parler Returns to Apple App Store with Some Content Excluded.’ *The Verge*, 17 May, 2021: <https://www.theverge.com/2021/5/17/22440005/parler-apple-app-store-return-amazon-google-capitol>; Kevin Randall. ‘Social App Parler is Cracking Down on Hate Speech — But Only on iPhones.’ *The Washington Post*, 17 May, 2021: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/05/17/parler-apple-app-store/>.

<sup>49</sup> Joan Donovan. ‘Navigating the Tech Stack: When, Where and How Should We Moderate Content?’ *CIGI*, 28 October, 2019: <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/navigating-tech-stack-when-where-and-how-should-we-moderate-content/>.

<sup>50</sup> Lyons, ‘Parler Returns to Apple App Store’; Randall, ‘Social App Parler is Cracking Down on Hate Speech.’

<sup>51</sup> In 14 January, 2021 post by Pavel Durov to his personal Telegram channel: <https://t.me/s/durov?q=%E2%80%9Cthe+largest+digital+migration+in+human+history%E2%80%9D>.

<sup>52</sup> In 8 February, 2021 post by Pavel Durov to his personal Telegram channel: <https://t.me/durov/152>.

<sup>53</sup> Michael Schwartz. ‘Telegram, Pro-Democracy Tool, Struggles over New Fans from Far Right.’ *The New York Times*, 26 January, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/26/world/europe/telegram-app-far-right.html>.



In the wake of this mass migration, Telegram announced they had blocked hundreds of extreme right user posts calling for violence ahead of the US Presidential inauguration on 20 January.<sup>54</sup> At around the same time, they also banned at least two dozen neo-Nazi channels that had been operating on the platform for some time, most of which had between 2,000 and 10,000 followers.<sup>55</sup> At the end of 2021, Telegram nevertheless remained a preferred app of extreme right users.

An ironic twist was that not only did those who stormed the Capitol on that January Wednesday widely utilise the Internet in the run-up to and during the incident, but much of this same content led to their eventual arrests and prosecutions. According to data collection and analysis undertaken by the Program on Extremism at George Washington University, 82% of the criminal complaints thus far arising from the events of 6 January contained evidence from social media, with 52% stemming from individuals' own social media content.<sup>56</sup> This is because many of the rioters posted a range of content, including their intent to engage in criminal behaviour and/or footage of their actual criminal behaviour as it was happening, sometimes even naming themselves. Thousands of amateur online sleuths archived and analysed this online content and shared their 'leads' with the FBI who acted on some of it.<sup>57</sup> Facebook was reported in the Program on Extremism's research as the most cited platform in the evidence marshalled to charge and prosecute those arrested on 6 January, but YouTube, Instagram, and Parler were also cited.<sup>58</sup>

## TRENDS IN EXTREME RIGHT ONLINE ACTIVITY AND NARRATIVES IN 2021

Trends in online extreme right narratives in 2021 must be discussed in the context of also 2020, specifically the COVID-19 pandemic. From the outset of widespread so-called 'lockdowns,' a variety of actors pointed to these as having the potential to increase online radicalisation. Warnings of this type were delivered by the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, in July,<sup>59</sup> then EU Counterterrorism Coordinator, Gilles De Kerchove, in

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Ali Breland. 'Telegram Finally Takes Down Neo-Nazi Channels.' *Mother Jones*, 13 January, 2021: <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2021/01/telegram-nazi-ban/>.

<sup>56</sup> Jonathan Lewis and Bennett Clifford. 'Footprints: Social media evidence form the US Capitol siege perpetrators.' *GNET*, 25 January, 2021: <https://gnet-research.org/2021/01/25/take-nothing-but-pictures-leave-nothing-but-digital-footprints-social-media-evidence-from-the-us-capitol-siege-perpetrators/>.

<sup>57</sup> David Yaffe-Bellany. 'The Sedition Hunters: Amateur Internet Sleuths Have Turned the Washington, DC, Insurrection on Jan. 6 Into the Ultimate Online Manhunt.' *Bloomberg*, 7 June, 2021: <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2021-capitol-riot-sedition-hunters/>. See also, Aymann Ismail. 'The Cigarette Smoking Man: I Filmed Inside the Capitol Riot. When I Heard from the FBI, I Faced a Vexing Dilemma.' *Slate*, 12 August 2021: <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/08/capitol-riot-footage-photos-online-detectives-fbi.html>.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> United Nations. 'Secretary-General Warns Terrorists Are Exploiting COVID-19 Pandemic, Calls for Vigilance, at Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week Opening.' *Press Release*, 6 July, 2020: <https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sgsm20161.doc.htm>.



August;<sup>60</sup> and a variety of police and security agencies over the course of the year.<sup>61</sup> Such cautions continued into 2021, communicated by, among others, German Interior Minister, Horst Seehofer, in June;<sup>62</sup> European Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, in June;<sup>63</sup> Australia's Home Affairs Minister, Karen Andrews, in September;<sup>64</sup> the UK Security Minister, Damian Hinds, in November;<sup>65</sup> and, again, a variety of police and security agencies.<sup>66</sup>

In 2021, as in 2020, concerns were that anti-Covid measures, especially 'lockdowns,' would lead to people spending more time online and that this would lead to increased numbers of users being exposed to extremist content and narratives, some of whom would probably be radicalised by the latter and their online networking around it. A particular concern was that extreme right groups and users would capitalise on this to reach larger and more varied audiences than previously.

Research confirmed that the pandemic coincided with an increased interest in extremist online content. In the week of 30 March 2020, Moonshot found an average increase in engagement with white supremacist online content of 21 percent in US states with 'stay-at-home orders' of 10 days or more compared with the eight previous months.<sup>67</sup> In April 2020, ISD revealed that mentions of 'corona-chan,' a slang term for COVID-19 then popular with far-right users, had increased massively across both mainstream (e.g., in March, Facebook interactions with the term increased by 1,920%) and fringe (e.g., between February and March, the term was used over 13,000 times on 4chan) social media platforms.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Raffaello Pantucci. 2020. 'A View from the CT Foxhole: Gilles de Kerchove, European Union (EU) Counter-Terrorism Coordinator.' *CTC Sentinel* 13(8): <https://ctc.usma.edu/a-view-from-the-ct-foxhole-gilles-de-kerchove-european-union-eu-counter-terrorism-coordinator/>.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians. 2021. *Annual Report 2020* (Ottawa Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada): [https://nsicop-cpsnr.ca/reports/rp-2021-04-12-ar/annual\\_report\\_2020\\_public\\_en.pdf](https://nsicop-cpsnr.ca/reports/rp-2021-04-12-ar/annual_report_2020_public_en.pdf).

<sup>62</sup> Ben Knight. 'Pandemic Spurred Extremism, Says German Domestic Intelligence' *Deutsche Welle*, 15 June, 2021: <https://www.dw.com/en/pandemic-spurred-extremism-says-german-domestic-intelligence/a-57906728>.

<sup>63</sup> Europol. 'Terrorists Attempted to Take Advantage of the Pandemic, Says Europol's New EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021.' *Press Release*, 22 June, 2021: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/terrorists-attempted-to-take-advantage-of-pandemic-says-europol%E2%80%99s-new-eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2021>.

<sup>64</sup> Hamish Goodall. 'Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews Warns Extremists Radicalised Online During Pandemic.' *7News*, 14 September, 2021: <https://7news.com.au/sunrise/on-the-show/home-affairs-minister-issues-karen-andrews-warn-extremists-radicalised-online-during-pandemic-c-3956569>.

<sup>65</sup> Jessica Elgot, Vikram Dodd and Jamie Grierson. 'More People May Have Self-radicalised Online in Pandemic, Warns Minister.' *The Guardian* (UK), 16 November, 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/nov/16/more-people-may-have-self-radicalised-online-in-pandemic-warns-minister>.

<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Elias Visontay. 'Far Right "Exploiting" Anger at Lockdowns to Radicalise Wellness Community, Police Say.' *The Guardian*, 24 February, 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/feb/25/far-right-exploiting-anger-at-lockdowns-to-radicalise-wellness-community-police-say>.

<sup>67</sup> Moonshot Team. 'COVID-19: The Impact of Social Distancing on Engagement with Violent Extremist Content Online in the United States: Initial Observations.' *Moonshot*, 14 April, 2020: <https://moonshotteam.com/social-distancing-white-supremacy/>.

<sup>68</sup> ISD Global. 'COVID-19 Disinformation Briefing No. 2.' *ISD*, 9 April, 2020: <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/COVID-19-Briefing-02-Institute-for-Strategic-Dialogue-9th-April-2020.pdf>.

A June 2020 study of Canadian users showed a “statistically significant increase in searches for violent far-right extremist content” across four cities in the six-week period from the imposition of stay-at-home orders versus prior.<sup>69</sup> Davies, Wu, and Frank’s analysis of seven online extremist forums found that posting behaviour on both violent right-wing extremist and incel forums increased significantly following the declaration of the pandemic, but that comparable trends were not observable on left-wing or jihadist forums.<sup>70</sup> Similar findings were made by researchers studying German-speaking right-wing, left-wing, and Islamist extremist activity across a range of mainstream and more fringe platforms across 2020.<sup>71</sup>

EU Member States too reported to Europol an increase in online transnational right-wing activities.<sup>72</sup> Researchers made similar findings. Between the beginning of March and the end of September 2020, German-speaking far-right actors—including those based not just in Germany, but also Austria and Switzerland—on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube grew their audience an average of 18%.<sup>73</sup> This increase was even more prodigious on Telegram where German language right-wing extremist channels grew by almost 350% between the beginning of the pandemic and September 2020. Important to note here is that this growth was not evenly distributed across these far-right actors but dominated by far-right conspiracy theorists.<sup>74</sup>

Likewise, in Ireland the extreme right made increasing use of Telegram to organise, recruit, and spread disinformation in 2020 and into 2021. The administrators of these Telegrams channels used language and tactics commonly seen in the US and international far-right movements. One in ten messages posted by Irish anti-lockdown and COVID-19 conspiracy theory Telegram channels originated from far-right sources. Anti-mask rallies in Dublin were heavily promoted by far-right channels on Telegram. These same channels were used to promote disinformation that an incident which occurred during one such protest was a staged ‘false flag’ operation to “smear the protesters.”<sup>75</sup> Anti-Semitic slurs were also used to describe counter-protestors.

As regards overall right-wing narrative trends, extreme right users, groups, and movements sought to integrate COVID-19 and responses to it into their existing narratives. Reminiscent of previous pandemics, people were searching for explanations, especially who to hold responsible for events, and the online far- and extreme right had readymade answers for them.<sup>76</sup> In 2021, right-wing extremists continued to exploit the pandemic to support

<sup>69</sup> Moonshot Team. ‘COVID-19: Increase in Far-right Searches in Canada.’ *Moonshot*, 8 June, 2020: <https://moonshotteam.com/covid-19-increase-in-searches-for-violent-far-right-content-in-canada/>

<sup>70</sup> Garth Davies, Edith Wu, and Richard Frank. 2021. ‘A Witch’s Brew of Grievances: The Potential Effects of COVID-19 on Radicalization to Violent Extremism.’ *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* [Online First].

<sup>71</sup> Jakob Guhl and Lea Gerster. 2020. *Crisis and Loss of Control: German-Language Digital Extremism in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic* (London: ISD): <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/crisis-and-loss-of-control-german-language-digital-extremism-in-the-context-of-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

<sup>72</sup> Europol. *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2021 (TE-SAT)* (The Hague: Europol), p. 27: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/european-union-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-2021-tesat>.

<sup>73</sup> Guhl and Gerster, *Crisis and Loss of Control*, p.13.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>75</sup> Aine Gallagher and Ciaran O’Connor. 2021. *Layers of Lies: A First Look at Irish Far-Right Activity on Telegram* (London: ISD): <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/layers-of-lies/>.

<sup>76</sup> Davies, Wu, and Frank, ‘A Witch’s Brew of Grievances.’

longstanding anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, anti-immigration and anti-Islam rhetoric, and accelerationist narratives.

Both Germany and France saw a significant rise in anti-Semitic content online during the pandemic.<sup>77</sup> Several of the anti-Semitic narratives relate to the COVID-19 pandemic itself, ranging from conspiracy theories presenting vaccines as a Jewish plot to sterilise or control populations to representations of Jewish people as unhygienic or as themselves a ‘virus.’ Other older anti-Jewish tropes have also proliferated online in 2020 and 2021, such as Jews ruling international financial, political, and media institutions, and Holocaust denial.

A majority of this anti-Semitic—and other already-described content—is non-violent and not obviously illegal under French and German law, which poses a challenge for technology companies and governments in line with other ‘legal but harmful’ content.<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, as pointed out by Europol in their TE-SAT 2021, which rounds-up extremist and terrorist activity EU-wide in 2020:

In general, the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic and social crises have contributed to polarisation in society, causing attitudes to harden and increasing acceptance of intimidation, including calls to commit violent acts. Expressions of social dissatisfaction increased, both online and offline, with social media playing a facilitating and mobilising role, as well as the proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories.<sup>79</sup>

As demonstrated by the figures supplied above, this polarisation created opportunities for right-wing extremist users, groups, and movements to reach and mobilise audiences beyond their traditional supporter circles.

Two ways in which this continued to be facilitated in 2021 were via algorithmic amplification of extreme right content and extreme right users’ efforts to cloak their content to avoid takedown and, particularly, the overlap of these: the algorithmic amplification of borderline content. Algorithmic amplification refers to “any process that increases the circulation rate of any particular information or content online.”<sup>80</sup> The role of major Internet companies recommender algorithms in facilitating extreme right radicalisation has been the subject of research dating back to at least 2014.<sup>81</sup> These concerns received added impetus in 2021, with Facebook whistle-blower Frances Haugen’s assertion that the company’s algorithms were “dangerous,”<sup>82</sup> along with the emergence of information about an internal 2019 Facebook study where a fake India-based account was created and studied to see what types of content

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<sup>77</sup> Milo Comerford and Lea Gerster. 2021. *The Rise of Antisemitism Online During the Pandemic: A Study of French and German Content* (London: ISD), p.9: <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-rise-of-antisemitism-during-the-pandemic/>.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2021*, p.28.

<sup>80</sup> Victoria Jordan, Kristin Thue and Jacopo Bellasio. 2021. *Malign Use of Algorithmic Amplification of Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content: Risks and Countermeasures in Place* (Brussels: RAN PS), p.8.

<sup>81</sup> Derek O’Callaghan, Derek Greene, Maura Conway, Joe Carthy, and Pádraig Cunningham. ‘Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems.’ *Social Science Computer Review* 33(4).

<sup>82</sup> Karen Hao. ‘The Facebook Whistleblower Says its Algorithms are Dangerous. Here’s Why.’ *MIT Technology Review*, 5 October, 2021: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/10/05/1036519/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-algorithms/>.

it was recommended. It was found that within three weeks the fake account’s newsfeed was inundated with “hate speech, misinformation and celebrations of violence.”<sup>83</sup>

Extreme right users themselves also have a hand in this. They are cognisant that outright hate, extremist, and terrorist content will generally be removed from major platforms, so they increasingly produce and circulate content that very closely skirts, but does not contravene platforms’ content moderation policies.<sup>84</sup> Such content, often referred to as ‘borderline,’ intentionally uses ambiguous language, and takes the form of ‘humour,’ memes, and similar, and is difficult for automated content moderation tools to identify and for human content moderators to pass judgement on too. Such borderline content is nonetheless increasingly subject to scrutiny and takedown. An example, is the January 2021 removal by Amazon of 92—largely self-published—books containing Holocaust denial that, until their removal, had been ‘recommended’ (i.e., algorithmically amplified) by Amazon’s systems.<sup>85</sup>

## EXTREME RIGHT USERS’ CURRENTLY PREFERRED ONLINE PLATFORMS, SPACES, AND TOOLS

### Fringe and Mainstream Social Media Platforms

It can be useful to distinguish between major, mainstream social media platforms and the extreme right activity thereon and a diversity of more fringe platforms that host increasing amounts of right-wing extremist content, due at least in part to its accelerating takedown by major platforms. Some major platforms too remain core nodes in the online extreme right ecosystem.

Even prior to Christchurch, never mind 6 January, 2021, the increasing inhospitableness of major social media and other online platforms to extreme right content and activity resulted in far-right—largely US—activists establishing their own platforms that welcome, indeed encourage, just such content and activity. Many of these platforms had their user numbers considerably boosted in 2020 and into 2021.

Between the last week of July 2020 and the final week of July 2021, visits to MeWe jumped nearly 300% to almost 1.5 million weekly visits. Gab grabbed an even larger slice of visitor numbers, which increased 400% in the same period to nearly 3 million visits per week. As already mentioned, Parler was the outlier site amongst those favoured by right-wing users, with its visitor numbers halved to c.200,000 weekly in the same period.<sup>86</sup>

Just because these are US platforms does not mean that they are restricted to US users. Most of these platforms have sizeable European user numbers, especially from English-speaking

<sup>83</sup> Sheera Frenkel and Davey Alba. ‘The Facebook Papers: In India, Facebook Grapples With an Amplified Version of Its Problems’ *The New York Times*, 9 November, 2021: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/23/technology/facebook-india-misinformation.html>.

<sup>84</sup> For example, YouTube identifies borderline content as “content that comes close to, but doesn’t quite violate our Community Guidelines.” See <https://blog.youtube/inside-youtube/on-youtubes-recommendation-system/>.

<sup>85</sup> Mathilde Froth. ‘Amazon Removes 92 Books Promoting Holocaust Denial.’ *The Jewish Chronicle*, 26 January, 2021: <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/amazon-removes-92-books-promoting-holocaust-denial-1.511149>.

<sup>86</sup> Harwell, ‘Rumble, a YouTube Rival Popular with Conservatives, Will Pay Creators.’

countries (i.e., Ireland, UK), but also others. For example, the fringe right-wing alternative social media platform Gab continues to host numerous European-focused groups (see Table 1). The listed groups are all fairly active, and discussions occur mostly in their respective languages (i.e., English, French, German, Dutch, Swedish). While GAB France is only for France-related news and French users, *Gab Francais* is targeted at all francophone users. IN 2021, conspiracy theories around COVID-19 (e.g., #plandemic) and agitation against COVID measures (e.g., anti-lockdowns, anti-mask, anti-vaccine) are prominent features of many of these groups, as is a variety of hate content. Outlinking to and cross-posting from other fringe platforms, such as Bitchute, Gettr, and Rumble, but also major platforms, such as Telegram and YouTube, are also apparent.

Table 1. Selection of Europe-focused Gab Groups and their Membership Numbers		
Group Name	Number of Members	URL
#Brexit GB	28.1k members	<a href="https://gab.com/groups/730">https://gab.com/groups/730</a>
GAB France	11k members	<a href="https://gab.com/groups/2085">https://gab.com/groups/2085</a>
DEUTSCH	9k members	<a href="https://gab.com/groups/467">https://gab.com/groups/467</a>
Gab Francais	9k members	<a href="https://gab.com/groups/2041">https://gab.com/groups/2041</a>
NederlandGAB nl	6.9k members	<a href="https://gab.com/groups/2896">https://gab.com/groups/2896</a>
Swegab	6.6k members	<a href="https://gab.com/groups/2523">https://gab.com/groups/2523</a>
FREEDOM-UK-USA and Europe.	2.1k members	<a href="https://gab.com/groups/4218">https://gab.com/groups/4218</a>

As already pointed out, a major platform that continues to host large amounts of right-wing extremist content is Telegram. This includes users, groups, and channels associated with a number of proscribed right-wing terrorist organisations, such as Atomwaffen Division and Proud Boys. Another major platform that gained enormously in popularity, particularly amongst young people, during the pandemic was TikTok. The Chinese-owned video-sharing platform established in 2016 now has an estimated 1 billion users. TikTok came under scrutiny this year for its uneven response to right-wing extremist content in its users, since summer 2021, up-to-three-minute videos. (The previous maximum length of a Tik Tok video was 60 seconds).

Searches, using a lengthy list of right-wing-related keywords, in the period 4 to 30 June, 2021, found 1,030 videos from 491 TikTok accounts featuring “hateful and extremist content.”<sup>87</sup> Footage related to the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack was described as “easily discoverable on TikTok.”<sup>88</sup> This took the form of 30 videos that featured support for the attacker, including 13 containing content livestreamed by Tarrant during the course of the attack.<sup>89</sup>

Together three of the top ten most-viewed videos from the same sample of 1,030 videos had 3.5 million views, displayed content originally produced by imprisoned US white supremacist Paul Miller (‘Gypsy Crusader’).<sup>90</sup> Two of the top ten most-viewed videos in the June sample—with 655,800 and 233,000 views respectively—mocked the victims and denied the existence

<sup>87</sup> Ciaran O’Connor. 2021. *Hatescape: An In-Depth Analysis of Extremism and Hate Speech on TikTok* (London: ISD), p.10: <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/hatescape-an-in-depth-analysis-of-extremism-and-hate-speech-on-tiktok/>.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.21.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36

of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide and the Holocaust.<sup>91</sup> A separate analysis also appeared this year evidencing the active presence of US far-right militia groups on TikTok.<sup>92</sup>

### New Right-wing Oriented Social Media Platform(s)

GETTR was launched by former US President Trump aide Jason Miller on 4 July, 2021 with the aim of providing the answer for US conservatives who say they are battling censorship on more mainstream platforms. In this manner it resembles Parler and Gab before it and like those platforms it's user interface closely resembles that of Twitter. In addition to American far-right figures such as Steve Bannon and Marjorie Taylor Greene, the platform has attracted the attention of several far-right movements, including QAnon and the Proud Boys. In Europe, French far-right figures such as Alain Soral, Daniel Conversano, Stéphane Ravier, and Eric Zammour all have accounts on the platform. Conversano, Ravier, and Zammour are active users, but with widely varying follower counts: Ravier has 69.5k, Zammour 35.2k, but Conversano only c.3,200.

Former US President Donald Trump is not on Gettr; instead, on 20 October, 2021, he announced plans to launch yet another new platform called TRUTH Social. It is mentioned here due to the high likelihood of it attracting a variety of types of right-wing extremist users, including those based in Europe. The truthsocial.com homepage describes itself as America's "Big Tent" social media platform that "encourages open, free, and honest global conversation without discriminating against political ideology." It is unclear whether the site will ever be operational, however. The platform appears to have missed its own November deadline to launch an invitation-only beta version;<sup>93</sup> the share price of the SPAC company, which Trump's social media firm plans to merge with has since plummeted; and Trump's social media firm is now seeking an additional US\$1 billion in funding.<sup>94</sup>

### Online Gaming

Online gaming is a core component of the online entertainment industry and has spawned an array of platforms, including not just game hosting services but a variety of adjacent spaces that have been developed for use by gamers.<sup>95</sup> A core concern of those focused on extremist and terrorist-related activity on these platforms is that their users skew young and so may be more vulnerable to radicalisation than older users. For example, a 2020 report from the European Union Counter-Terrorism Coordinator argued that there is a "huge target audience for radicalisation on gaming platforms, especially among young people, who tend

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16 and p.36

<sup>92</sup> Olivia Little. 'TikTok is Prompting Users to Follow Far-right Extremist Accounts.' *MediaMatters*, 26 March, 2021: <https://www.mediamatters.org/tiktok/tiktok-prompting-users-follow-far-right-extremist-accounts>.

<sup>93</sup> Christina Milkie and Dan Mangan. 'Trump SPAC Social Media Company Appears to Miss its First Product Deadline.' *CNBC*, 1 December, 2021: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/01/trump-spac-social-media-company-appears-to-miss-first-deadline.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Krystal Hu. 'Exclusive: Trump's Social Media Venture Seeks \$1 Billion Raise – Sources.' *Reuters*, 1 December, 2021: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/us/exclusive-trumps-social-media-venture-seeks-1-billion-raise-sources-2021-12-01/>.

<sup>95</sup> Suraj Lakhani. 2021. *Video Gaming (Violent) Extremism: An Exploration of the Current Landscape, Trends, and Threats* (Brussels: RAN Policy Support), p.3.



to be more vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment.”<sup>96</sup> Europol’s 2021 TE-SAT report points to a similar trend, observing “[t]his might help explain the increasingly young suspects arrested for right-wing terrorism and extremism.”<sup>97</sup>

Although not new, 2021 saw continued reliance by the extreme right on gaming platforms such as Steam, Discord, Dlive, and Twitch. The Institute for Strategic Dialogue conducted a series of studies on extreme right content and activity across these platforms in 2021 by ISD was that the vast majority of extreme right users and communities observable on these platforms were not connected with a specific extremist group or groups but were instead active in the broader online extreme right movement(s) or ‘scene(s)’.<sup>98</sup>

Valve-owned Steam was launched in 2003 as a digital game distribution service. Today, it describes itself as the “ultimate destination for playing, discussing, and creating games.” In addition to installation and automatic updating of games, it provides server hosting, video streaming, and social networking services, including friends lists and groups, in-game voice and chat functionality, and cloud storage. In research conducted in 2021, Vaux and colleagues found that “the extreme right use Steam as a hub for individual extremists to connect and socialise...[and that] Steam seems to have an entrenched and long lasting extreme right community.”<sup>99</sup>

Going to users being active in what might be termed the extreme right online gaming ‘scene’ broadly, only two Steam communities expressly affiliated themselves with a right-wing extremist group. One community affiliated with the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) and contained links to the NRM’s official website. This channel was relatively small, with only 87 members but appeared to be active.<sup>100</sup> The other community was named after Misanthropic Division (MD), a Russian extreme right group now active in several countries, including Germany, the UK, and Ukraine. This channel had little public content but more members, a number of which used extreme right terminology in their screen names.<sup>101</sup>

Like Steam, Discord (estbd. 2015) was originally aimed at those wishing to communicate when playing multi-player gamers. Currently, it has real time text, voice, and video chat functionality, with users also able to share a variety of file types. Recent analysis of the type of extreme right content and interactions prevalent on Discord’s ‘servers’ (i.e., chat rooms) indicated these primarily hosted racist trolls who drew on the white nationalist and supremacist forum cultures of sites such as 4chan and 8kun, along with neo-Nazi content. While none of the servers were directly affiliated with violent extremist groups, users did

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<sup>96</sup> EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator. ‘Online Gaming in the Context of the Fight Against Terrorism.’ *Council of the European Union*, 6 July, 2020, p.4: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9066-2020-INIT/en/pdf>.

<sup>97</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2021*, p.91.

<sup>98</sup> Jacob Davy. 2021. *Gamers Who Hate: An Introduction to ISD’s Gaming and Extremism Series* (London: ISD): <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/gamers-who-hate-an-introduction-to-isds-gaming-and-extremism-series/>.

<sup>99</sup> Pierre Vaux, Aoife Gallagher, Jacob Davey. *Gaming and Extremism: The Extreme Right on Steam* (London: ISD), p.4: <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/gaming-and-extremism-the-extreme-right-on-steam/>.

<sup>100</sup> Vaux et al., *Gaming and Extremism*, p.6.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*



promote the graphics and activity of the proscribed terrorist groups Atomwaffen Division and Sonnenkrieg Division.<sup>102</sup>

The past year has seen a variety of gaming platforms take action against right-wing extremist users and content. Discord was once viewed as a haven for white nationalists. It began to turn this around from 2017 however, following organisers of and attendees at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, USA, making heavy use of the platform. In April 2021, Discord reported that it had banned more than 2,000 extremist communities.<sup>103</sup>

In terms of streaming platforms, the blockchain-based DLive (estbd. 2017) was found to be home to extreme right influencers, including white supremacists and white nationalists, promoting a range of talking points. In response to increased content moderation by the platform in 2021 some of these influencers have instead opted for alternatives such as Trove and Odysee, which have yet to impose content moderation practices.<sup>104</sup>

Twitch is a larger streaming platform, which launched in 2011 and was bought by Amazon in 2014. Twitch, the primary purpose of which is live streaming by gamers of themselves playing games, entered the headlines when the 2019 Halle shooter livestreamed his attack via the platform. In 2021, far- and extreme right Twitch content was found to be focused on the promotion of conspiracy theories, misogyny, and white supremacist worldviews.<sup>105</sup> In general, it doesn't appear that a large right-wing extremist community of content creators currently exists on the platform.

### Cryptocurrency

Extremists and terrorists have a lengthy history of online fundraising, including soliciting donations and sale of merchandise via websites and social media.<sup>106</sup> While it is not wholly clear how much money is involved, extremists and terrorists have been accepting funds in cryptocurrency for some time too. In 2018, infamous neo-Nazi troll Andrew Auernheimer, a.k.a Weev, encouraged the use of Monero, as it "best maintains our privacy."<sup>107</sup> Extreme right users and groups donated and received cryptocurrency throughout 2020 and into 2021. In December 2020 a terminally ill French donor<sup>108</sup> sent at least a dozen far-right individuals and groups over US\$500,000 in Bitcoin. Recipients included Nick Fuentes, the Daily Stormer, and a French Holocaust denier. Fuentes, an alt-right personality and leader of the so-called 'Groyper Army,' was present at the Capitol Hill Riots though he maintains he only protested

<sup>102</sup> Davy, *Gamers Who Hate*, p.6.

<sup>103</sup> Bobby Allyn. 'Group-Chat App Discord Says It Banned More than 2,000 Extremist Communities.' *NPR*, 5 April, 2021: <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/05/983855753/group-chat-app-discord-says-it-banned-more-than-2-000-extremist-communities>.

<sup>104</sup> Elise Thomas. 2021. *Gaming and Extremism: The Extreme Right on DLive* (London: ISD), p.7: <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/gaming-and-extremism-the-extreme-right-on-dlive/>.

<sup>105</sup> Ciaran O'Connor. 2021. *Gaming and Extremism: The Extreme Right on Twitch* (London: ISD): <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/gaming-and-extremism-the-extreme-right-on-twitch/>.

<sup>106</sup> Michael Jacobson. 2010. 'Terrorist Financing and the Internet.' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33(4).

<sup>107</sup> Julia Ebner. 'The Currency of the Far-right: Why Neo-Nazis Love Bitcoin.' *The Guardian*, 24 January, 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/24/bitcoin-currency-far-right-neo-nazis-cryptocurrencies>.

<sup>108</sup> Conor Maloney. 'Unmasking the Deceased Programmer Who Donated 28 Bitcoin to Capitol Hill Rioters.' *Crypto Briefing*, 16 January, 2021: <https://cryptobriefing.com/unmasking-deceased-programmer-donated-bitcoin-capitol-hill-rioters/>.

outside and did not enter the Capitol building.<sup>109</sup> He received the largest share of the donated bitcoin worth US\$250,000.

In their TE-SAT 2021 Europol pointed out that “[t]he use of cryptocurrency for terrorism financing is attractive for organisations whose access to the banking system is increasingly restricted.”<sup>110</sup> The Nordic Resistance Movement’s website’s ‘Donation’ page lists cash, electronic transfer, and an extensive list of crypto currencies the group can accept, including Bitcoin, Ethereum, Litecoin, and Monero. At least one reason that NRM accepts cryptocurrency donations is, as pointed out on the same page, that the Nordic countries have terminated their bank accounts.<sup>111</sup>

Other sources of cryptocurrency include the already mentioned live streaming platform DLive, which allows users to make donations to other users in the form of cryptocurrency. Between 15 April 2020 and early February 2021, 55 far-right individuals and groups were able to earn a total of US\$866,700 via the platform. In response to the Capitol Hill events, DLive indefinitely suspended those who used the platform to livestream their own and others participation and also rescinded those users’ access to any cryptocurrency tokens given to them by community members.<sup>112</sup>

### Websites

Extremist and terrorist websites never really went away, they were just overlooked for a decade by researchers and others due to a not unwarranted narrowing of focus to social media platforms and, latterly, messaging applications and adjacent online spaces.

While there is less reliance on websites by extremists and terrorists than there once was, websites remain an important component of the contemporary online extremist and terrorist ecosystem(s) and could re-emerge more strongly with accelerated disruption of extremist and terrorist content and accounts by social media platforms and adjacent services unless providers further down ‘the tech stack’ (e.g., cloud services, content delivery networks, domain registrars)<sup>113</sup> take more concerted action.

Websites played a key role in events at the US Capitol on 6 January 2021. These included Ali Alexander’s StopTheSteal.us, Women for America First’s TrumpMarch.com, WildProtest.com—a URL paying homage to the Trump tweet displayed in Figure 2—the Oath Keeper’s site, and MarchToSaveAmerica.com.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>109</sup> ‘Alt-Right Groups and Personalities Involved in the January 2021 Capitol Riot Received over \$500K in Bitcoin from French Donor One Month Prior.’ *Chainalysis*, 14 January, 2021: <https://blog.chainalysis.com/reports/capitol-riot-bitcoin-donation-alt-right-domestic-extremism>.

<sup>110</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2021*, p.33.

<sup>111</sup> See <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/donations/>.

<sup>112</sup> Peter Stone. ‘US Far-right Extremists Making Millions Via Social Media and Cryptocurrency.’ *The Guardian*, 10 March, 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/10/us-far-right-extremists-millions-social-cryptocurrency>.

<sup>113</sup> For more on this, see Maura Conway and Seán Looney. 2021. *Back to the Future? Twenty First Century Extremist and Terrorist Websites* (Brussels: RAN Policy Support), pp.’s 26–30.

<sup>114</sup> DFR Lab, ‘#StopTheSteal.’

In the EU and wider European context, the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement’s (NRM) maintains an extensive online presence, including two prominent websites, one in Swedish ([www.nordfront.se](http://www.nordfront.se)) and another in English ([nordicresistancemovement.org](http://nordicresistancemovement.org)), and a number of local branch sites. While the [nordicresistancemovement.org](http://nordicresistancemovement.org) website avoids explicitly violent imagery, it contains text expressing violent ideas. For example, in the item titled ‘Simon Lindberg’s Thoughts on the Mosque Shootings,’ the NRM leader, Lindberg, justified the 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack by reference to falling white birth rates and violent jihadist terrorism, even though Lindberg described the shooting itself as “counter-productive.”

Thomas’ 2021 research on far-right websites found that rather than being custom-built by professional developers or web designers, the majority were built using open-source technologies. Specifically, 63 of the 100 sites in her dataset were built using WordPress, as was the NRM site.<sup>115</sup> Thomas’ figures for the extreme right’s use of open-source website development tools and software are out of line with general use of open-source technologies to build websites. Approximately 34% of all websites today use WordPress’ content management system; Thomas’ figure of 63% hovers around double this.

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<sup>115</sup> Elise Thomas. 2021. *Open Source, Self Defence: Tackling the Challenge of Extremist Websites and Open Source Tech* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue), p.8: [https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Open-Source-Self-Defence\\_v2.pdf](https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Open-Source-Self-Defence_v2.pdf).

## PART II. JIHADI ONLINE CONTENT AND ACTIVITY IN 2021

Despite the loss of its ‘Caliphate’ and a downturn in terrorist attacks in the West, IS was still active globally in both ‘real world’ and online settings in 2021. Similar to concerns around increased time online leading to some users having increased exposure to extreme right content, more time spent online during the pandemic has probably also increased some users’ consumption of and networking around jihadi content.<sup>116</sup>

### JIHADI TERRORISM IN 2021

Six violent jihadist terrorist attacks occurred in the West in 2021. On 22 March a 21-year-old man shot 10 people dead at a supermarket in Boulder, Colorado, USA. It is unclear whether the shooter had any links to violent jihadism. Analysis of his Facebook account revealed that while he did mention Islam, there was no indication on his account that suggested he held radical views of any kind.<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, the shooter was touted as a role model in AQAP’s ‘Inspire Guide #6: The Colorado Attack’ in which he was described as “our hero brother” and a “mujahid,” but which claimed no direct link to the shooter or the attack.<sup>118</sup>

On 23 April a female police employee was killed in a knife attack at a police station in the Paris commuter town of Rambouillet. The attacker was shot by police during the attack.<sup>119</sup> The attacker’s Facebook posts were exclusively concerned with the defence of the Muslim Community, and the Islamophobia displayed by the French polemicist, and current presidential candidate, Eric Zemmour. Following the October 2020 assassination of Samuel Paty, the attacker had joined a Facebook group titled ‘*Respectez Mohamed prophète de Dieu*’ (Respect Mohamed, Prophet of God), which legitimised violence against those offending Prophet Mohamed.<sup>120</sup>

In May, the pro-al-Qaeda media outlet Thabat published an article in praise of the Rambouillet attacker. The article noted that the stabbing came “just days” after the latest issue of the AQAP magazine *Wolves of Manhattan*. In that issue an article offered a bitcoin reward “to anyone who can kill a member of the Crusader police in Western countries.” On 26 April Thabat had issued a brief post praising the attacker, calling him a “mujahid brother”,

<sup>116</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2021*, pp.’s 26–27.

<sup>117</sup> Coleen Slevin. ‘Lawyer: Colorado Shooting Suspect Needs Mental Health Review.’ *AP News*, 26 March, 2021: <https://apnews.com/article/ahmad-al-aliwi-alissa-1st-court-appearance-boulder-shooting-d870b03a763d8b20dfa04a26a1379a1>.

<sup>118</sup> Mina al-Lami. ‘Al-Qaeda Gives Detailed Instructions to “Lone Wolves” in US, West.’ *BBC Monitoring*, 1 July, 2021.

<sup>119</sup> ‘French Police Station Stabbing: Terror Inquiry into Rambouillet Knife Attack.’ *BBC News*, 23 April, 2021: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-56862436>.

<sup>120</sup> ‘Rambouillet: Ce Que l’On Sait de l’Assaillant Qui a Tué une Fonctionnaire de Police.’ *France Info*, 24 April, 2021: [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/faits-divers/terrorisme/fonctionnaire-de-police-tuee-a-rambouillet/fonctionnaire-de-police-tuee-a-rambouillet-ce-que-l-on-sait-de-l-assaillant\\_4384485.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/faits-divers/terrorisme/fonctionnaire-de-police-tuee-a-rambouillet/fonctionnaire-de-police-tuee-a-rambouillet-ce-que-l-on-sait-de-l-assaillant_4384485.html).

without suggesting that he was linked to any particular jihadist group.<sup>121</sup> (Thabat has since been removed from Telegram).

On 3 September six people were stabbed and wounded in a supermarket in Auckland, New Zealand. The attacker was known to authorities as a supporter of IS prior to the attack and was under 24 hour surveillance at the time.<sup>122</sup> He had previously been subject to prosecution under the Terrorism Suppression Act after he had attempted to travel overseas to join IS. Specifically, he had purchased a knife and shown a lot of interest in IS propaganda that encouraged conducting knife attacks in the West.<sup>123</sup>

On 13 October four women and a man were killed and two others wounded when a 37-year-old man used a bow and arrow to attack them in Norway. It was reported that the suspect had converted to Islam and was known to police over fears he had been radicalised.<sup>124</sup> In contrast to the Colorado and Rambouillet attacks there was a limited jihadist reaction online to this attack with no publications or media outlets publishing articles in relation to it. On the pro-IS RocketChat server a few low-profile IS supporters discussed the attack, hoping “the brother” (i.e., attacker) acted on behalf of IS.<sup>125</sup>

On 15 October UK MP for Southend West David Amess was stabbed to death. The attacker had been previously referred to the UK government’s Prevent scheme, a programme to stop radicalisation, but he was not considered a subject of interest for security agencies.<sup>126</sup> The incident has been formally declared an act of terrorism,<sup>127</sup> and an early investigation has revealed “a potential motivation linked to Islamist extremism.”<sup>128</sup> Similarly to the Norway attack there has been very limited jihadi reaction to this attack. A jihadist news-focused channel, Sanam News Agency, factually reported on the incident, highlighting Amess’s membership of the Conservative Party.

Noted here too is the 14 November Liverpool incident, in which an improvised explosive device carried by a taxi passenger blew up, killing him and injuring the driver. The precise nature of this attack is unclear at time of writing. The attacker was an asylum seeker who was reported as being from variously Syria, Jordan, and Iraq, and a convert from Islam to

<sup>121</sup> ‘Jihadist Outlet Says France Stabbing Followed ‘Lone Wolf’ Incitement.’ *BBC Monitoring*, 4 May, 2021.

<sup>122</sup> “‘It Was Hateful, It Was Wrong’: Six Injured in NZ Stabbing Attack.’ *Al Jazeera*, 3 September, 2021: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/3/new-zealand-pm-says-mall-stabbing-a-terrorist-attack>.

<sup>123</sup> Tess McClure. ‘Auckland Stabbings: Calls for Tighter Terror Laws After Extremist Allowed to Roam Free.’ *The Guardian*, 4 September, 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/04/auckland-stabbings-calls-for-tighter-terror-laws-after-extremist-allowed-to-roam-free>.

<sup>124</sup> ‘Kongsberg: Five Dead in Norway Bow and Arrow Attack.’ *BBC News*, 14 October, 2021: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-58906165>.

<sup>125</sup> ‘Limited Jihadist Reaction to Norway Bow and Arrow Attack.’ *BBC Monitoring*, 15 October, 2021.

<sup>126</sup> ‘Sir David Amess Killing: What We Know About Ali Harbi Ali Who is Being Held on Suspicion of Murder.’ *Sky News*, 18 October, 2021: <https://news.sky.com/story/sir-david-amess-killing-what-we-know-about-ali-harbi-ali-who-is-being-held-on-suspicion-of-murder-12437757>.

<sup>127</sup> UK Counter Terrorism Policing. ‘Counter Terrorism Policing Response to the Tragic Murder of Sir David Amess.’ *Press Release*, 15 October, 2021: <https://www.counterterrorism.police.uk/counter-terrorism-policing-response-to-the-tragic-murder-of-sir-david-amess/>.

<sup>128</sup> Peter Walker, Vikram Dodd, Matthew Weaver, and Dan Sabbagh. ‘David Amess: MP’s Killing Declared a Terrorist Incident.’ *The Guardian*, 16 October, 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/15/counter-terrorism-police-take-over-inquiry-into-david-amess-killing>.

Anglicanism. He had a history of mental health issues, having previously been sectioned under the Mental Health Act due to his behaviour with a knife.<sup>129</sup> Four men were arrested in connection with the explosion but were subsequently released.<sup>130</sup>

Again, this incident received only limited reactions in online jihadi spaces. A handful of IS supporters on Telegram shared a factual news report of the incident, and an obscure pro-IS Rocket.Chat account shared news of the incident with some positive commentary: “All praise to Allah” and a smiley emoji.<sup>131</sup> One factor in the relative lack of online response to the final three attacks is the suspension of jihadi accounts from Telegram in the run-up to the 9/11 anniversary in September.<sup>132</sup> The muddy nature of the information surrounding the Liverpool attack, including the perpetrator’s conversion, was definitely also a factor in the muted response to that incident.

Worth noting here, finally, is that internationally, there were many jihadi attacks carried out in 2021. Perhaps the deadliest was the 26 August suicide bomb attack by IS Khorasan Province at Kabul Airport that killed 183 people and injured hundreds more. A large number of fatalities (c.150) also resulted from the overrunning of the town of Palma in Mozambique, by IS’s Central Africa Province, between 24 March and 5 April, 2021. Palma was destroyed by the attack, and French energy giant Total SE decided to suspend all operations in the area due to the events.

In terms of online IS content accompanying the attack, they released an initial text statement claiming it. They followed-up with the release of a just-over-one-minute video containing raw footage of the events in Palma on 29 March via its Amaq ‘news agency.’ The video was distributed via the group’s accounts on Telegram. Notable is that while news of the attack on Palma was first reported by international news outlets on 24 March, the IS claim didn’t appear until days later. BBC Monitoring suggested that this may have been due to the group facing “communication challenges in getting its propaganda out, possibly due to internet connectivity.” (Alternatively, they pointed out, the claim may have been delayed for operational purposes, which has happened previously in respect to Mozambique attacks).<sup>133</sup>

## TRENDS IN JIHADI ONLINE CONTENT

IS’s loss of territorial control in 2017 negatively affected not only its capacity to orchestrate complex directed attacks in the West but also, as predicted,<sup>134</sup> damaged the group’s content production capacities due to the loss of media production facilities, equipment, and personnel. The quantity and quality of official IS online propaganda was therefore in a

<sup>129</sup> ‘Liverpool Bomb: What We Know So Far.’ *BBC News*, 18 November, 2021: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-59287001>.

<sup>130</sup> ‘Liverpool Bomb: Four Freed as Suspect Killed in Blast Named.’ *BBC News*, 16 November, 2021: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-59301708>.

<sup>131</sup> ‘Limited Jihadist Reaction to Liverpool Blast.’ *BBC Monitoring*, 15 November, 2021.

<sup>132</sup> ‘Key Pro-al-Qaeda Voices Still Absent Online.’ *BBC Monitoring*, 21 October, 2021.

<sup>133</sup> Abdirahim Saeed and Paul Brown. ‘Decoding IS’s Video of Mozambican Town Assault.’ *BBC Monitoring*, 30 March, 2021.

<sup>134</sup> Maura Conway. 2018. *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2017: The Year in Review* (Dublin: VOX-Pol): pp.’s 1–6: [https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol\\_publication/YiR-2017\\_Web-Version.pdf](https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/YiR-2017_Web-Version.pdf).

continued state of decline in 2021, with text-based communiques being much more prevalent than the release of videos or even still images. It is estimated that an average of one official IS video a month was released in 2021, which is a stark contrast to the estimated 50 videos produced in August 2015. This downturn was somewhat offset by both the sustained production and circulation of supporter content and fallback on ‘old’ material. Other jihadis, besides IS, particularly al-Qaeda and its affiliates, also continued to produce and circulate online content in the 12-month period under review.

Like extreme right users and groups, jihadi terrorists too sought to use the COVID-19 pandemic for propaganda purposes, with IS interpreting the pandemic as a punishment from God on his enemies, and Al-Qaeda framing the spread of COVID-19 in Islamic-majority countries as “a sign that people had abandoned true Islam, and appealed to Muslims to seek God’s mercy by liberating Muslim prisoners, providing for people in need, and supporting jihadist groups.”<sup>135</sup> These narratives were much more prominent in 2020 than in 2021 however.

IS’s most stable online product remains its Arabic-language al-Naba newsletter. First published in 2014, 50 issues appeared in the period under review here, the first (no. 263) on 3 December, 2020 and the last (no. 313) on 18 November, 2021. In 2021, issues were a standard 12 pages long and each contained two page-length infographics. Both the first and last issue in the period under review had as their frontpage headlines IS activity in Africa, with the December 2020 issue focused on Chad and Nigeria and the November 2021 issue focused on Uganda, Mozambique, and Congo.

As has become commonplace, IS and al-Qaeda, their franchises, and supporters continued to seek to ‘inspire’ lone actor attacks in the West in 2021. As in previous years too, the aftermath of many of the above-described attacks saw an increase in such calls. Like in 2020, in 2021 IS underlined the ‘successes’ of its franchises outside of Iraq and Syria, especially in Africa, in an effort to detract from the loss of their ‘Caliphate.’ The plight of various Muslim populations was also emphasised (e.g., Rohingya), as was that of jihadi prisoners, including IS-affiliated women and their children held in camps in Syria. Al-Qaeda messaging also continued to portray itself as distinct from IS in a variety of ways, including focusing largely—though not exclusively—on ‘local’ issues.

Fan-produced IS content is not new. IS’s October 2018 ‘Inside the Caliphate #8’ video contained clear acknowledgement of the increased amounts of user-generated content (UGC) as distinct from official IS content produced by IS ‘fanboys’—and ‘fangirls’?—apparent in online settings more than three years ago.<sup>136</sup> The video, which was largely concerned with dos and don’ts for IS’s active online *munasirun* or ‘supporters,’ had the function of both crediting *munasirun* activity while, at the same time, seeking to rein it in somewhat. Times have changed considerably since 2018 however and in 2021 supporter content and activity was viewed by IS as crucial and frequently encouraged.

An important component of this activity was the establishment of new online media outlets by IS supporters; Europol already had this to say about these in 2020:

<sup>135</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2021*, p.27.

<sup>136</sup> Conway, *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2018*, pp.’s 7–9.



As official IS media outlets like Nashir News and A'maq News faced increasing suspensions, new media outlets took over the task of delivering IS' daily feed of information. Media outlets supporting IS stepped up their capabilities and attempted to take on the role of official media outlets. Uqab News, for instance, surfaced in 2020 and produced digital media products such as statements and infographics reporting news from the battlefield, thereby mimicking the role traditionally fulfilled by A'maq News.<sup>137</sup>

This activity has continued into 2021, including as a way to avoid takedown from major social media platforms by posing as legitimate news outlets.

Tech Against Terrorism reported seeing "several coordinated efforts by supporter networks of designated terrorist organisations to disseminate content on mainstream platforms under the guise of 'reporting' on current events."<sup>138</sup> These networks' behaviour adapts to the specific platforms on which they are operating aided by their attention to these platforms' Terms of Service and well-developed knowledge of their content moderation decisions more broadly. So, for example, they utilise usernames and profile pictures of a journalistic sort, avoid direct references to terrorist groups, don't display logos associated with the latter, and seek to avoid automated moderation via unusual spellings of words, including the insertion of numbers and other characters.<sup>139</sup>

IS supporters were not the only ones establishing new media outlets in 2021. The al-Fursan (Knights) Media Group and al-Hikma (Wisdom) were both promoted in July by pro-AQAP personality 'Warith al-Qassam' on his Telegram channel, which has since been removed by the company.<sup>140</sup> Another new pro-AQAP media group promoted by al-Qassam was Qurtoba Media. Their debut 14 second video showed what appeared to be a 'martyrdom' operation on a police station in Afghanistan.<sup>141</sup>

In terms of magazines, 2021 saw the release of five new issues of the pro-al-Qaeda women's magazine Ibnat al-Islam (Daughter of Islam) by the Bayt al-Maqdis media outfit. Issue 19 in April, was published predominantly in Arabic but had a section in English and covered topics such as the proposed hijab ban in France, and the plight of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. All were very lengthy, routinely running to over 70 pages; display a Gmail email contact address; and were shared via Bayt al-Maqdis's channel on the decentralised Rocket.Chat platform.

2021 also saw the release of the first edition of pro-IS Urdu magazine: *Yalghar* (Invasion). It was attributed to IS's Pakistan Province and claimed to be the first IS magazine in Urdu. Multiple articles concerned IS's rivals, the Afghan Taliban, declaring them stooges of Pakistani intelligence. The longest article, allegedly penned by a female member of IS, relays the difficulties she and her family faced at the time of the group's collapse in Syria in 2019.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2021*, p.58.

<sup>138</sup> Tech Against Terrorism. 2021. *Trends in Terrorist and Violent Extremist Use of the Internet | Q1-Q2 2021* (London: Tech Against terrorism), p.6: <https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Tech-Against-Terrorism-Q1-Q2-TVEC-Trends-2021.pdf>.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> 'Al-Qaeda Supporter Promotes Two New Jihadist Media Outfits.' *BBC Monitoring*, 31 July, 2021.

<sup>141</sup> 'New Pro-al-Qaeda Media Group Emerges Online.' *BBC Monitoring*, 3 August, 2021.

<sup>142</sup> BBC Monitoring. 'First Edition of Pro-IS Urdu Magazine Released.' *BBC Monitoring*, 4 May, 2021: <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c202jmcv>.

Finally, there was only muted reaction to the video message of al-Qaeda’s leader Ayman al-Zawahiri released on 23 November. In it Zawahiri railed against Muslims interacting with the UN, which he described as a betrayal of Islam and abandonment of Sharia. Online jihadists who commented on the video—mostly IS supporters—took it to be veiled criticism of the Taliban, which has been seeking to fill Afghanistan’s seat in the organisation. While Zawahiri mentioned the Taliban in the video, it was not in connection with any recent events.<sup>143</sup>

This was only the second video from the al-Qaeda leader in 2021, the first was published on 11 September, 2021 to commemorate the 9/11 attacks, but was focused on condemning Arab governments that have normalised relations with Israel rather than addressing 9/11 itself. The hour-long production was released on 11 September by al-Qaeda’s longstanding media outlet al-Sahab via Rocket.Chat. The Arabic-language video was subtitled in English, and transcripts in both languages were provided. A lengthy book by Zawahiri was published online at around the same time and, again, was framed as commemorating 9/11, but it too hardly mentioned the attacks.

#### JIHADI USERS’ CURRENTLY PREFERRED ONLINE PLATFORMS, SPACES, AND TOOLS

As in 2020, IS’s online fans struggled to maintain their networks in 2021 in the face of significant disruption by major and a raft of medium platforms. While al-Qaeda and its affiliates and other jihadis were relatively less affected, they too were subject to widespread takedown in 2021. As a result, jihadi networks came to be spread across an even wider array of platforms and online spaces than previously. This dispersal made it increasingly difficult for users to find and follow relevant accounts, channels, and similar and therefore access and communicate about jihadi online content.

As has been ongoing for a number of years, jihadis and their supporters, including especially IS, worked throughout 2021 to regain a sufficient foothold on major mainstream social media platforms, including especially Facebook and Twitter. Often these efforts were coordinated on other platforms and messaging applications and exploited gaps in the targeted companies’ moderation processes. So-called ‘online raids’ also persisted in 2021, with users coordinating to flood the comments’ sections of public pages with terrorist content. Not all activity on major platforms was of this nature, however. In December 2020, for example, an imam in France was imprisoned for *apologie du terrorisme* after using TikTok to post extremist videos. In court, the imam described his use of TikTok as a way to seek fame as opposed to a strategy for reaching a young Muslim audience.<sup>144</sup>

Many of probably the same users as coordinating the above-described raids and other activity also made efforts throughout the year to establish themselves on an array of new and/or up-and-coming platforms. Within a short time of GETTR’s launch on 1 July, for example, IS supporters had created a raft of new accounts on the platform. Content shared by these accounts included an image of Donald Trump in an IS-style execution and posts

<sup>143</sup> For more on online responses to Zawahiri’s video, see ‘Jihadists See al-Qaeda Message as Criticism of Taliban.’ *BBC Monitoring*, 26 November, 2021.

<sup>144</sup> ‘How Pakistani Imam Used TikTok in France to Spread Terror.’ *France 24 News*, 27 November, 2020: <https://www.fr24news.com/a/2020/11/how-pakistani-imam-used-tiktok-in-france-to-spread-terror-world-news.html>.

delighting that the platform might present an opportunity similar to IS’s Twitter “glory days” when their accounts operated with ease on the platform.<sup>145</sup> This dream appeared short-lived however, with GETTR beginning to suspend pro-IS accounts shortly thereafter.

This is not to say that jihadis aren’t still relatively free to act in a variety of other online spaces. Telegram and Rocket.Chat are discussed in more detail below due to their continued importance within the jihadi online ecosystem in the 12-month period under review. Websites too were a feature of the jihadi, especially IS, online scene in 2021. Also, addressed below is cryptocurrency and its role during the year.

### Telegram

Official IS and ‘fan’ online content and activity continues to be most easily accessible via the messaging application Telegram, as do a wide array of other jihadi accounts and content. These users, accounts, and content were nonetheless subject to ongoing disruption by the company throughout 2021.

<b>Table 2. Number of IS Bots and Channels Banned by Telegram Per Month in 2021</b>	
<i>Month</i>	<i>Number of Bots and Channels Banned*</i>
<b>Jan-21</b>	19,672
<b>Feb-21</b>	15,669
<b>Mar-21</b>	15,688
<b>Apr-21</b>	15,254
<b>May-21</b>	18,044
<b>Jun-21</b>	15,069
<b>Jul-21</b>	19,121
<b>Aug-21</b>	20,296
<b>Sep-21</b>	34,286
<b>Oct-21</b>	33,439
<b>Nov-21</b>	25,356
<b>Dec-21**</b>	-----
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>231,894</b>
<i>* Per data supplied on Telegram’s official ‘ISIS Watch’ Channel</i>	
<i>** December data not available at time of writing</i>	

In December 2016, Telegram established a dedicated ‘ISIS Watch’ channel, which provides a running tally of numbers of “ISIS bots and channels banned” by them daily. In November 2019 Telegram, with the aid of Europol, made its first truly concerted effort to delete IS content from their platform. Prior to November 2019, the highest ever number of monthly bans by Telegram of IS bots and channels was 14,531 in December 2018. In November 2019 this tripled to 43,215 and increased again in December 2019 to 56,186. This considerable jump in bans was widely commented upon by IS supporters, researchers, and others and others at the time.

The November 2019 ramp-up in disruption by Telegram of IS activity and content has persisted since, with the new high figure for total number of takedowns in a single month (i.e., 56,858) recorded in April, 2020. See Table 2 for Telegram’s 2021 takedown data, which is roughly commensurate with its 2020 activity. The largest number of takedowns in 2021 occurred in September, many of these prior to and immediately after the 9/11 anniversary. Since they began making the information available in 2016, Telegram have reported the takedown of a total just shy of 900,000 IS bots and channels (see Table 3).

<sup>145</sup> Mark Scott and Tina Nguyen. ‘Jihadists Flood Pro-Trump Social Network with Propaganda.’ *Politico*, 2 August, 2021: <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/08/02/trump-gettr-social-media-isis-502078>.

Without additional context, it is difficult to tell whether the high numbers of takedowns in 2020 and 2021 are largely due to the company’s ramp-up in disruption activity first observed in 2019 and persisted with by them since or increased activity by IS users over the course of the pandemic or some combination of these.

### Rocket.Chat

Rocket.Chat has been a node in the jihadi online ecosystem since its establishment in 2015. Widespread disruption has meant that it’s now a primary way for jihadist groups and their various media outlets to disseminate propaganda, however. Rocket.Chat is a team chat platform, similar to Slack, which allows users to securely text, share files, video conference, and voice message. Crucially though, and in contrast to other similar platforms, it is open-source and decentralised; this decentralisation makes takedowns very difficult because the platform is not controlled by a single corporation, but by its individual users operating independently (i.e., self-hosting).<sup>146</sup>

**Table 3. Number of IS Bots and Channels Banned by Telegram Per Year**

Year	Number of Bots and Channels Banned*
2016**	2,652
2017	82,789
2018	91,233
2019	176,602
2020	311,703
2021***	231,894
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>896,873</b>
* Per data supplied on Telegram’s official ‘ISIS Watch’ Channel	
** December 2016 only	
*** To 30 Nov. 2021 only	

The pro-IS Rocket.Chat server TechHaven launched in late 2018 has, for example, displayed remarkable resilience and stability. The same applies to the pro-al-Qaeda Rocket.Chat server GeoNews, which has been stable since its December 2019 launch. While Rocket.Chat’s developers have stated that they have no way of acting against content stored on user-operated servers, in March 2021 the platform announced an internal task force to tip off authorities to any illegal use of its open-source code.<sup>147</sup>

### Websites

Another trend seeking to mitigate against the widespread takedown of jihadi accounts and content by social media and messaging companies and others is an increased reliance by jihadi groups and their supporters, including IS and al-Qaeda, on websites.

2021 has seen the emergence of password-protected ‘cloud’ websites that enable jihadis to share new and old content via URLs. Two important points made about these platforms by Tech Against Terrorism are that (1) they currently provide jihadists with a relatively stable, centralised location in which to store their content due to the process of taking down cloud

<sup>146</sup> For a useful explainer on the decentralised web or ‘DWeb,’ see Zoë Corbyn. ‘Decentralisation: The Next Big Step for the World Wide Web.’ *The Guardian*, 8 September, 2018: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/sep/08/decentralisation-next-big-step-for-the-world-wide-web-dweb-data-internet-censorship-brewster-kahle>.

<sup>147</sup> Rocket.Chat. ‘Rocket.Chat Announces Internal Task Force to Prevent Future Platform Use by Terrorist Groups.’ *Press Release*, 26 March, 2021: <https://rocket.chat/press-releases/rocket-chat-announces-internal-task-force-to-prevent-future-platform-use-by-terrorist-groups>. See also the discussion of Gab’s use of Mastodon and the latter’s response in Maura Conway. 2020. *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2019: The Year in Review* (Dublin: VOX-Pol), p.12: [https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol\\_publication/Violent-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Online-in-2019-The-Year-in-Review.pdf](https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Violent-Extremism-and-Terrorism-Online-in-2019-The-Year-in-Review.pdf).

sites being “extremely challenging” and (2) most jihadi cloud sites monitored by them utilise open-source software developed by German company NextCloud.<sup>148</sup>

Furthermore, a number of actors have drawn attention to the increased use of traditional websites by, especially, IS supporters. Many of these websites take an archival form too, hosting vast amounts of official IS content, ‘historical’ and current, including audio, videos, magazines, and posters, in a wide range of languages, including prominently English and French.

This is not a wholly new issue; as drawn attention to in Europol’s *TE-SAT 2021*:

...2020 saw the creation of websites and the movement of websites to new domains as a measure to avoid takedowns. Deletion particularly targeted official IS and supporter media outlets. In 2020 a constant turnover of branded media entities supportive of IS was noted, with some disappearing and new ones being introduced, probably in an effort to avoid deletion.<sup>149</sup>

As indicated above, hosting, security, and/or other service providers are plainly refusing service to especially IS supporter websites. This is indicated by the cycling of these sites through multiple and increasingly obscure domains and the relatively short online existence of many. For example, the Elokab IS supporter site has cycled through numerous country code top-level (ccTLD) and more general Internet top-level domains (TLD). Minor changes in spelling, as reflected in the shift in the domain name of the ‘elokab’ website to ‘elokabe,’ are also utilised for purposes of avoiding takedown, but still being findable by knowledgeable users.<sup>150</sup> Like the extreme right websites mentioned earlier, many of these sites use the free and open-source version of WordPress for site design and management.

### Cryptocurrency

In 2020 cryptocurrency was generally solicited by jihadis not for attack funding purposes, but a variety of other types of activity, including support of camp-based women and children and upkeep of online outlets. While the latter type of solicitations didn’t cease in 2021, there was an uptick in requests for funds—and, in at least one case, the payment of funds as, essentially a reward—for more directly attack-related purposes.

2021 saw IS seek to move from Bitcoin to other, more private, cryptocurrencies such as Monero. In April the pro-IS media outfit Afaq released infographics on their official website, which was then shared on Telegram and Rocket.Chat, showing how the sending and receiving of Bitcoin was unsafe. The warning pointed out that Bitcoin logs financial records and transactions on the blockchain and therefore transfers can be tracked. Afaq also cautioned that money transfer sites log IP addresses, purchase of Bitcoin, and cooperate with governments.<sup>151</sup>

In July Afaq began promoting the use of Monero as a safe alternative to Bitcoin due to it being “untraceable.” Rather than public instructions on how to buy the cryptocurrency, it

<sup>148</sup> Tech Against Terrorism, *Trends in Terrorist and Violent Extremist Use of the Internet*, p.4.

<sup>149</sup> Europol, *TE-SAT 2021*, pp.’s 57–58.

<sup>150</sup> For more on this see, Conway and Looney, *Back to the Future?* pp.’s 28–29.

<sup>151</sup> ‘Pro-IS Tech Outfit Warns Supporters About Bitcoin.’ *BBC Monitoring*, 19 April, 2021.

said that more detailed explanations on how to do so would be provided privately for people who were endorsed by a pro-IS media group.<sup>152</sup>

Similarly, the second issue of Myanmar based pro-IS group *Katiba al-Mahdi fi Bilad Arakan's* (Battalion of the Saviour in the Land of Arakan) English-language magazine contained a one-page poster, including a QR code, for those wishing to donate using Monero.<sup>153</sup>

An array of jihadists besides just IS and their supporters continued their solicitation of cryptocurrency in 2021.<sup>154</sup> Gaza's al-Qaeda-aligned *Jaysh al-Umma* (Army of the Nation) produced a series of posters listing the type of equipment they needed, how much it cost, and asking for contributions to the cost in Bitcoin.<sup>155</sup>

Cryptocurrency is also now being used as an incentive for action. In December 2020, pro-al-Qaeda media outfit Jaysh al-Malahim al-Electroni (al-Malahim Electronic Army) advertised a course on Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies on their Rocket.Chat channel. They described it as the "first of its kind in the world of jihadist electronic armies."<sup>156</sup> They also used Bitcoin to incite lone actor killings in the West with a poster in their *Wolves of Manhattan* magazine.<sup>157</sup> The poster offered one bitcoin, which the magazine valued at US\$60,000 to "anyone who can kill a member of the crusader police in Western countries."<sup>158</sup> The same issue also featured a tutorial on cryptocurrency.

## DIFFERENTIAL RESPONSES TO TALIBAN ONLINE ACTIVITY

The Taliban took over Afghanistan again in August 2021. When the Taliban were last in power, social media had not yet emerged; today 70% of Afghans have access to a mobile telephone and the Taliban are active across a range of social media and messaging applications though others are less accommodating. Meta-owned Facebook and Instagram, for example, were already taking down Taliban accounts and content prior to the takeover.<sup>159</sup> Twitter, on which the Taliban have been active since 2011 have taken a different view, however.

Twitter are allowing Taliban accounts and content to remain on the platform unless they explicitly contravened the company's Terms of Service, especially as regards glorification of violence. Three prominent Taliban accounts that were still active on Twitter on 1 December 2021 were those of their spokespeople: Zabehulah Mujahid (@Zabehulah\_M33; 440.7K followers), Qari Yousef Ahmadi (@QyAhmadi21; 92.3K followers), and Dr. Muhammed

<sup>152</sup> 'Pro-IS Tech Outfit Promotes 'Untraceable' Cryptocurrency Monero.' *BBC Monitoring*, 28 July, 2021.

<sup>153</sup> 'Pro-IS Myanmar Group Solicits Cryptocurrency Donations via Magazine.' *BBC Monitoring*, 12 May, 2021.

<sup>154</sup> For more on this topic, see Isaac Kfir. 2020. 'Cryptocurrencies, National Security, Crime and Terrorism.' *Comparative Strategy* 39(2).

<sup>155</sup> 'Gaza Jihadist Group Issues Statement on Jerusalem Events.' *BBC Monitoring*, 12 May, 2021.

<sup>156</sup> 'Pro-al-Qaeda Magazine Incites Killing Police in West.' *BBC Monitoring*, 15 April, 2021.

<sup>157</sup> This may have an unforeseen negative effect for the group as successful terrorist attacks have been associated with lower returns on cryptocurrency; see Pankaj C. Patel and Igor Pereira. 2021. 'The Relationship Between Terrorist Attacks and Cryptocurrency Returns.' *Applied Economics* 53(8).

<sup>158</sup> 'Pro-al-Qaeda Magazine Incites Killing Police in West.'

<sup>159</sup> 'Afghanistan: Facebook Continues Ban of Taliban-related Content.' *BBC News*, 17 August, 2021:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-58239786>.

Naeem (@IeaOffice; 277.1K followers). Together these three accounts grew their followers by 70,000+ over the course of October and November 2021.

As regards websites, five websites operated by the Taliban went offline on 20 August, 2021.<sup>160</sup> It remains unclear who or what was actually responsible for the shutdown. While it is widely assumed that San Francisco-based online security provider Cloudflare had a hand in it (i.e., removed their DDoS protections), the company did not respond to journalists' requests for comment nor did they publish an official Blog post on the matter.

Agreed by commentators is that Taliban 2.0 were engaged in the waning months of 2021 in what was, for them, a digital charm offensive on public social media while, at the same time, waging a campaign of intimidation against journalists and others via messaging applications, including Telegram and WhatsApp.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> For more on these websites, see Conway and Looney, *Back to the Future?*

<sup>161</sup> Amanda Florian. 'The Taliban are Using Private Messaging Apps to Threaten Afghan Journalists.' *Rest of World*, 5 October, 2021: <https://restofworld.org/2021/the-taliban-are-using-private-messaging-apps-to-threaten-afghan-journalists/>.



## PART III. RESPONSES TO ONLINE VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM IN 2021

Recent years have seen the EU Commission and many national governments—and, in 2021, some US states—around the world developing and implementing legislation to counter online hate, extremist, and terrorist content.<sup>162</sup> The 12-month period under review herein (i.e., 1 December, 2020 to 30 November, 2021) was particularly consequential in this respect. Watershed events were the coming into force of the EU’s Terrorism Content Regulation and the release of the so-called ‘Facebook Papers’.

Platform regulation received added impetus from Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen’s testimony before a variety of legislative committees in the US and Europe before which she advocated for increased regulation of Internet companies. Despite widespread support for regulation, particularly across the EU, much of the regulatory activity described below has been criticised by scholars and human rights experts, largely on the grounds of impinging on free speech and human rights.<sup>163</sup>

The bulk of this sub-section is focused on legislative responses to online extremism and terrorism in 2021, including attention to not just the EU Regulation, but also bills and acts progressing through the legislative process in the UK, Poland, Australia, New Zealand, and the US states of Florida and Texas. Tech company-focused legislation is not the only response mechanism available to state’s for responding to online extremism and terrorism, however. The role of proscription of groups as terrorist and the role of law enforcement, in this case Europol’s Internet Referral Unit, in content takedown are also discussed below. Before discussing these instruments though, the most consequential corporate response to online extremism and terrorism in 2021 was the initial round of decisions by Facebook’s new Oversight Board, which are described and discussed directly below.

### FACEBOOK OVERSIGHT BOARD CASES AND DECISIONS 2021

Facebook’s CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, first publicly floated the idea of an Oversight Board in November 2018,<sup>164</sup> with the Board’s 20 founding members announced in May 2020, and the Board officially beginning its work in October, 2020. Three of the Board’s members hail from EU member states: former Danish Prime Minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt; the Executive Director of Internet Sans Frontières, Julie Owono (Cameroon and France); and Central European University’s Prof. András Sajó (Hungary).<sup>165</sup> The Facebook Oversight

<sup>162</sup> For more on this, see Nery Ramati. 2020. *The Legal Response of Western Democracies to Online Terrorism and Extremism* (Dublin: VOX-Pol): [https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol\\_publication/The-Legal-Response-of-Western-Democracies-to-Online-Terrorism-and-Extremism.pdf](https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/The-Legal-Response-of-Western-Democracies-to-Online-Terrorism-and-Extremism.pdf).

<sup>163</sup> Tech Against Terrorism. 2021. *The Online Regulation Series: The Handbook* (London: Tech Against Terrorism): <https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Tech-Against-Terrorism-%E2%80%93-The-Online-Regulation-Series-%E2%80%93-The-Handbook-2021.pdf>.

<sup>164</sup> Kate Klonick. ‘Inside the Making of Facebook’s Supreme Court.’ *The New Yorker*, 12 February, 2021: <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/inside-the-making-of-facebooks-supreme-court>.

<sup>165</sup> For a full list of the FOB members and their backgrounds, see <https://www.oversightboard.com/meet-the-board/>.

Board (FOB) issued its first five decisions on 28 January, 2021, with four out of the five overturning Facebook’s actions regarding the issues submitted.

Seventeen decisions of the FOB were delivered in total during 2021. Fourteen of the cases fell into the hate, extremism, and terrorism realms construed broadly (see Appendix 1). Not all of these cases, their outcomes, and Facebook’s responses can be discussed here, but details of all can be found on the FOB website at [oversightboard.com](https://www.oversightboard.com). In summary however:

- A significant majority of all the cases decided in 2021, 82%, had hate, extremism, and/or terrorism aspects;
- Hate speech dominated, accounting for six cases, five cases fell into the category of ‘Dangerous individuals and organizations,’ and three ‘Violence and incitement’;
- Of the 13 cases in Appendix 1 on which a FOB decision was reached, eight overturned Facebook’s original decisions and five of these were upheld;
- Just two of the cases decided in 2021 involved proscribed terrorist organisations. The FOB overturned Facebook’s decision regarding takedown of a discussion of the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan’s imprisonment and Facebook reversed its decision and allowed Hamas-related content to stay up once it was alerted the case was going before the FOB. The FOB agreed with the latter reversal;
- Four of the cases had some European aspect, three related to France and one to the Netherlands;
- Two cases also had misinformation aspects, one in conjunction with violence and incitement in France and the other in conjunction with dangerous individuals and organisations.

The FOB decision attracting the most attention to date was 2021-001-FB-FBR, the decision on the banning of former US President Trump’s Facebook account in the wake of 6 January, 2021. The FOB decided to uphold Facebook’s decision to lock Trump’s account. The Board found that two of Trump’s posts regarding the events on Capitol Hill violated Facebook’s policies prohibiting praising or supporting violence and that, further, Trump’s false claims of voter fraud and calls to action created a risk of violence, particularly given his influence and reach. However, the statement that was released by the Board condemned Facebook’s decision to impose an “indeterminate and standardless penalty of indefinite suspension,” which was out-of-step with “Facebook’s normal penalties”: removing the violating content, imposing a time-bound suspension, or permanently disabling the page and account.<sup>166</sup>

The Board stated that going forward, Facebook must justify a proportionate and consistent response that is in line with its rules. It said that “it is not permissible for Facebook to keep a user off the platform for an undefined period, with no criteria for when or whether the account will be restored.” The Board also criticised Facebook’s decision to refer this case to them as avoiding its responsibilities and therefore “insists that Facebook apply and justify a defined penalty.”<sup>167</sup> The Board gave Facebook six months to reexamine the arbitrary decision it made on 7 January. It said that the new decision must consider the severity of the violation, the prospect of future harm, and be proportionate and consistent with

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<sup>166</sup> Facebook Oversight Board. 2021. ‘Case Decision 2021-001-FB-FBR.’ *Oversight Board*, p.1: <https://www.oversightboard.com/sr/decision/2021/001/pdf-english>.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33.

existing rules. The Board also said that “considerations of newsworthiness should not take priority when urgent action is needed to prevent significant harm.”<sup>168</sup>

In the event, Facebook announced on 4 June, 2021 that it was introducing “new enforcement protocols to be applied in exceptional cases such as this” and on the basis of these “suspending his accounts for two years, effective from the date of the initial suspension on January 7 this year.” They followed-up by saying:

At the end of this period, we will look to experts to assess whether the risk to public safety has receded. We will evaluate external factors, including instances of violence, restrictions on peaceful assembly and other markers of civil unrest. If we determine that there is still a serious risk to public safety, we will extend the restriction for a set period of time and continue to re-evaluate until that risk has receded.<sup>169</sup>

Given both the cases it has accepted to-date and the possibility of other major companies following suit, the FOB is plainly an experiment to watch in the online violent extremism and terrorism realms.

## PROSCRIPTION

Today a host of Western democratic governments, including Canada, the UK, the US, and others, as well as the EU and UN, produce lists of proscribed terrorist organisations. Outside of the US, most have both a domestic and international focus. These render decisions around what does and does not constitute terrorism content and should therefore be removed from their platforms easier for technology companies.

Some caveats apply, however. First, terrorism designation lists have only recently begun to include right-wing terrorist groups. The first such proscription was of National Action by the UK government in December 2016 and a number of similar designations have been made since (see Table 4). Notably, both Canada and the UK proscribed the US neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division, also known as Nationalist Socialist Order as a terrorist group in 2021, due to it being linked with at least five murders, explosions, and hate crimes in the US. The group does not appear to have a prominent physical presence in the UK, but it does have an online presence, and the decision to proscribe promotes international solidarity. It also allows the UK government to freeze and seize assets, disrupt activities, and use immigration powers.<sup>170</sup> Canada also proscribed the Proud Boys, which originated there, in February; they are the only country to have done so. None of the 21 organisations presently appearing on the EU’s terrorism designation list is extreme right in its orientation.<sup>171</sup>

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>169</sup> Nick Clegg. ‘In Response to Oversight Board, Trump Suspended for Two Years; Will Only Be Reinstated if Conditions Permit.’ *Facebook Newsroom*, 4 June, 2021: <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/06/facebook-response-to-oversight-board-recommendations-trump/>.

<sup>170</sup> Hayley Evans. ‘All You Need to Know About the UK Proscribing the Neo-Nazi Group Atomwaffen Division.’ *Lawfare*, 17 May, 2021: <https://www.lawfareblog.com/all-you-need-know-about-uk-proscribing-neo-nazi-group-atomwaffen-division>.

<sup>171</sup> Worth noting here, however, is that in May 2016 the European Commission launched the ‘Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online,’ which by 2021 had eight signatory companies: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Microsoft, Instagram, Dailymotion, Snapchat, and Jeuxvideo.com. For more on this, go to [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_20\\_1135](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_1135). More recently, the European Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism has developed a non-legally binding list of violent right-wing extremist

Second, some proscription lists are highly political, including those of some democratic countries, and thus some designations have met with resistance within the international community. Israel’s October 2021 designation of six Palestinian human rights and civil society groups as terrorist has been widely criticised, for example.<sup>172</sup> Much less contentious was the US’s 2021 designation of, amongst others, IS-DRC and IS-Mozambique as terrorist entities (and their removal of Colombia’s FARC from the listing).

Table 4. Designation of Extreme Right Terrorist Groups by Democratic Countries and Supranational Organisations						
	UN	EU	US	UK	Canada	Australia
<b>Blood and Honour</b>	---	---	---	---	✓	---
<b>National Action</b>	---	---	---	✓	---	---
<b>Combat 18</b>	---	---	---	---	✓	---
<b>Sonnenkrieg Division</b>	---	---	---	✓	---	✓
<b>Scottish Dawn</b>	---	---	---	✓	---	---
<b>National Socialist Anti-Capitalist Action</b>	---	---	---	✓	---	---
<b>System Resistance Network</b>	---	---	---	✓	---	---
<b>Feuerkrieg Division</b>	---	---	---	✓	---	---
<b>Atomwaffen Division</b>	---	---	---	✓	✓	---
<b>National Socialist Order</b>	---	---	---	✓	✓	---
<b>Russian Imperialist Movement</b>	---	---	✓	---	✓	---
<b>The Base</b>	---	---	---	✓	✓	---
<b>Proud Boys</b>	---	---	---	---	✓	---
✓ = Designated terrorist group ✓ = Designated under synonym or umbrella group or by affiliation						
<i>Source: Adapted from Terrorist Content Analytics Platform’s (TCAP) ‘Group Inclusion Policy’ at <a href="https://www.terrorismanalytics.org/group-inclusion-policy">https://www.terrorismanalytics.org/group-inclusion-policy</a>.</i>						

## LAW ENFORCEMENT REFERRAL REQUESTS

The EU’s Internet Referral Unit (EU IRU) and a number of countries refer online terrorist content to Internet companies hosting it, that then consider whether the referred content breaches companies ToS or other guidelines and should thus be removed from their platform. Referrals are a voluntary tool and help improve public-private cooperation around online terrorism and responses to it.

Europol organised the first Referral Action Day (RAD) targeting right-wing terrorist online content on 27 May, 2021. Coordinated by the EU IRU, it involved law enforcement from 28 countries, including not just EU member states, but also Australia, Georgia, the UK, and the New York City Police Department. The content referred included violent right-wing extremist and terrorist content; proscribed right-wing groups’ official or supportive content; content

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groups, symbols, and manifestos with the aim of providing guidance to EUIF Internet companies in their content moderation efforts.

<sup>172</sup> Tania Krämer. ‘Critics Seek Proof After Israel Designates Palestinian Rights Groups as Terrorists.’ *Deutsche Welle*, 26 October, 2021: <https://www.dw.com/en/critics-seek-proof-after-israel-designates-palestinian-rights-groups-as-terrorists/a-59623937>.

concerning right-wing terrorist attacks, including video of attacks, attackers' online manifestos, and similar.<sup>173</sup>

During the Referral Action Day, the parties involved reviewed the referral process, from detecting terrorist content to its flagging to online service providers (OSPs). A total of 1,038 items were assessed for referral to the relevant Internet companies on the day. In a post-RAD press release, Europol stated that “[t]his first Referral Action Day against right-wing terrorist and extremist online propaganda aimed to discover the sources of Internet activities and develop approaches to combat them. Similar joint actions will continue to be organised in the future.”<sup>174</sup>

The EU IRU also organised an online jihadist propaganda RAD on 14 July, targeting propaganda hosted on the US-based Internet Archive, which has been a core node in the online jihadi ecosystem for many years. The day involved law enforcement from Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, and the UK finding relevant content and then referring it to the Internet Archive for checking against their ToS. The referred content included a variety of types of material, such as audio, video, and digital magazines, produced by IS, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates.<sup>175</sup>

## LEGISLATION

### EU Regulation on Addressing the Dissemination of Terrorist Content Online

The Regulation addressing the dissemination of Terrorist Content Online (TCO Regulation) will enable competent authorities of EU Member States to send legally binding orders to hosting service providers to remove or block access to terrorist content. The Regulation will become fully applicable on 7 June 2022.

At the core of the regulation is a requirement that tech companies remove content or disable access to it in all EU member states within one hour of having received a removal order from a competent authority.<sup>176</sup> “Member states will adopt rules on penalties, the degree of which will take into account the nature of the breach and the size of company responsible.”<sup>177</sup> This regulation does not apply to content that is journalistic, intended to be educational, artistic, or is for research purposes. It also does not impose a general obligation on companies to monitor content; however, once aware of terrorist content, companies must take measures to address its dissemination. Finally, platforms and competent authorities must publish annual transparency reports that include information on the removal orders and actions taken to address the dissemination of terrorist content.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Europol. ‘1<sup>st</sup> Referral Action Day Against Right-wing Terrorist Online Propaganda.’ *Press Release*, 28 May, 2021: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/1st-referral-action-day-against-right-wing-terrorist-online-propaganda>.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> Europol. ‘Jihadist Content Targeted on Internet Archive Platform.’ *Press Release*, 16 July, 2021: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/jihadist-content-targeted-internet-archive-platform>.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

The regulation has been highly criticised, particularly the one-hour timeframe for removal, which it is feared will infringe on freedom of speech. Some have argued that one hour is insufficient time to undertake such requests and could lead to platforms over-blocking to reduce the risk of receiving a penalty. Other platforms may not have sufficient staffing or resources to meet the timeframe, placing unfair burdens on smaller platforms.<sup>179</sup> Although there is not a legal obligation to use automated tools, use of these tools is likely one of the only methods that will allow platforms to meet the strict timeframe. This raises concerns surrounding the errors and bias that come with using these tools, particularly where there is very little oversight and transparency.<sup>180</sup>

### UK Online Safety Bill

In 2019, the UK Government said that it would like the UK to be the safest place in the world to use the internet. This resulted in the Online Safety Bill, of which a draft was published in May 2021.<sup>181</sup> Under the draft Bill, “social media sites, websites, apps and other services hosting user-generated content or allowing people to talk to others online must remove and limit the spread of illegal and harmful content such as child sexual abuse, terrorist material and suicide content.”<sup>182</sup>

All the companies that fall under the scope of the proposed legislation would be required to accede to a new duty of care “that what is unacceptable offline will also be unacceptable online.” The Bill splits tech companies into two categories. ‘Category 1 services’ are the largest and most popular social media platforms. These platforms will need to take action against content that is illegal but also content that is lawful but still “harmful.” They will have to explicitly state in their terms and conditions how they will address these harms. These companies will also have to publish assessments of their impact on freedom of expression and the actions that they took to mitigate any adverse effects. ‘Category 2 services,’ so smaller companies, must only take action against illegal content.<sup>183</sup>

Under this legislation, Ofcom, which is the UK’s already-established independent broadcasting regulator, will have the power to fine companies up to £18 million or ten percent of their annual global turnover, or block access to the platform, if a platform fails to comply with the proposed duty of care. There is also a deferred enforcement option of

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<sup>179</sup> Balazs Denes. ‘Open Letter on Behalf of Civil Society Groups Regarding the Proposal for a Regulation on Terrorist Content Online.’ 9 November, 2020: [https://edri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/TERREG\\_Openletter\\_Liberties.pdf](https://edri.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/TERREG_Openletter_Liberties.pdf); United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. ‘UN Human Rights Experts Concerned about EU’s Online Counter-terrorism Proposal.’ Press Release, 12 December, 2018: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24013&LangID=E>; Tech Against Terrorism. ‘Tech Against Terrorism Response to the EU’s Terrorist Content Online Regulation.’ *VOX-Pol Blog*, 30 June, 2021: <https://www.voxpol.eu/tech-against-terrorism-response-to-the-eus-terrorist-content-online-regulation/>.

<sup>180</sup> Fanny Hidvegi. ‘Open Letter to EU Parliament on the Terrorism Database.’ *Access Now*, 7 February, 2019: <https://www.accessnow.org/open-letter-to-eu-parliament-on-the-terrorism-database/>.

<sup>181</sup> Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. *Draft [UK] Online Safety Bill*. May, 2021: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/985033/Draft\\_Online\\_Safety\\_Bill\\_Bookmarked.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/985033/Draft_Online_Safety_Bill_Bookmarked.pdf).

<sup>182</sup> Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. ‘Landmark Laws to Keep Children Safe, Stop Racial Hate and Protect Democracy Online Published.’ *Press Release*, 12 May, 2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/landmark-laws-to-keep-children-safe-stop-racial-hate-and-protect-democracy-online-published>.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*

criminal liability on senior managers, which will be able to be implemented at a later date if required.<sup>184</sup>

Previous iterations of the proposal were criticised, first, for a lack of clarity surrounding the definition of “harmful” content and then, in December 2020, updating the definition to include content that has a “psychological impact on individuals,” which is difficult to determine. Scholars argue that such unclear definitions will result in platforms having to determine for themselves what content is harmful and could result in over-blocking out of fear of penalties.<sup>185</sup> It could cause confusion for users too.<sup>186</sup>

Other criticisms include the use of Ofcom instead of a new independent regulator due to the new tasks being very different to the existing broadcasting regulatory duties that Ofcom undertakes and therefore requiring different expertise. Some argue, in addition, that a new body would have created a positive symbolic effect to showcase the UK Government’s commitment to countering this content; also, that it would have minimised confusion among the public as to who to contact regarding any issues.<sup>187</sup> Finally, there is concern surrounding the severity of the penalties albeit it is claimed that blocking access to sites and senior management liability will only be used when other penalties have been exhausted.

### Polish Law on Protecting the Freedoms of Social Media Users

At the beginning of 2021, the Polish Ministry of Justice announced the development of a new law to protect the freedoms of social media users. The law aims to prevent the arbitrary power of these platforms by making it illegal for platforms to delete content that does not break Polish law.<sup>188</sup> Under the proposed new law, users could file a petition to a new electronic court—being referred to as the ‘Free Speech Council’—to overturn the decision of the platform and restore the removed content if it did not break Polish law.<sup>189</sup> The ‘Free Speech Council’ would be made-up of law and new media experts and would have seven days to decide on cases before it.<sup>190</sup> If a social media platform does not restore the content within 24-hours then it could receive a fine of up to €11 million.

There are two main concerns with this draft legislation. The first is that the severity of the fine may incentivise platforms to leave potentially violating content online so that they do

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Sally Broughton Micova and Sabine Jacques. 2019. ‘HM Government’s Online Harms White Paper.’ Submission to public consultation from the Centre for Competition Policy, University of East Anglia: <https://research-portal.uea.ac.uk/en/publications/hm-governments-online-harms-white-paper>.

<sup>186</sup> Stefan Theil. 2019. ‘The Online Harms White Paper: Comparing the UK and German Approaches to Regulation.’ *Journal of Media Law* 11(1).

<sup>187</sup> Patrick Bishop, Seàn Looney, Stuart Macdonald, Elizabeth Pearson, and Joe Whittaker. 2019. ‘Response to the Online Harms White Paper.’ Submission to public consultation from CYTREC, Swansea University: <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/media/Response-to-the-Online-Harms-White-Paper.pdf>.

<sup>188</sup> Panoptykon Foundation. 2021. ‘Polish Law on “Protecting the Freedoms of Social Media Users” Will Do Exactly the Opposite.’ *EDRi*, 10 February, 2021: <https://edri.org/our-work/polish-law-on-protecting-the-freedoms-of-social-media-users-will-do-exactly-the-opposite/>.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid*; Panoptykon Foundation, ‘Polish Law on “Protecting the Freedoms of Social Media Users.”’

<sup>190</sup> Magdalena Gad-Nowak and Marcin S. Wnukowski. 2021. ‘Polish Freedom of Speech on Social Media Platforms.’ *Nat Law Review* 11(340): <https://www.natlawreview.com/article/polish-government-to-pass-law-will-allow-it-more-control-over-internet-content-and>.



not have to go through this process and face penalties.<sup>191</sup> The second is that the Council will be subject to political influence.<sup>192</sup> With regard to the latter, it is noticeable that the proposed Polish law and the discourse around it are very similar to the proposed Florida and Texas laws introduced by their Republican governors and discussed below.

### Australian Online Safety Bill

The Australian Online Safety Bill was introduced in Parliament in February 2021. It takes a similar view to the UK Online Safety Bill that what is unlawful offline should also be unlawful online. Amongst other things, the draft bill:

[E]stablishes an online content scheme for the removal of certain material; creates a complaints-based removal notice scheme for cyber-abuse being perpetrated against an Australian adult; broadens the cyber-bullying scheme to capture harm occurring on services other than social media; reduces the timeframe for service providers to respond to a removal notice from the eSafety Commissioner; brings providers of app distribution services and internet search engine services into the remit of the new online content scheme; and establishes a power for the eSafety Commissioner to request or require internet service providers to disable access to material depicting, promoting, inciting or instructing in abhorrent violent conduct for time-limited periods in crisis situations.<sup>193</sup>

The Bill has a takedown timeframe of 24 hours, proposes a self-regulatory code of conduct that tech companies must adhere to regarding countering online disinformation, and grants the eSafety Commissioner the power to immediately block websites hosting abhorrent violent or terrorist material, such as the Christchurch attack.<sup>194</sup>

### New Zealand Livestreaming Bill and Content Regulatory System Review

Also in February 2021, New Zealand passed a Bill that seeks to update the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 in an attempt to address livestreaming after the Christchurch attack. “The Bill provides additional regulatory tools to manage harms caused by content that is livestreamed or hosted by online content hosts.”<sup>195</sup> Under this Bill, livestreaming objectionable content is a criminal offence. It only applies to the individual or group responsible for livestreaming the content however, not the platform that provided the livestreaming service.<sup>196</sup> Under the Bill, the New Zealand Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) would appoint inspectors who could issue takedown notices on objectionable content, which could be appealed if believed to be erroneous. If a person continues to disseminate the content after the issue of a notice then they would be committing an offence under this law.

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<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> Panoptykon Foundation, ‘Polish Law on “Protecting the Freedoms of Social Media Users.”’

<sup>193</sup> Parliament of Australia. *Online Safety Bill 2021*:

[https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Bills\\_Legislation/Bills\\_Search\\_Results/Result?bid=r6680](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Bills_Legislation/Bills_Search_Results/Result?bid=r6680).

<sup>194</sup> Madeleine Gandhi. ‘Update on Online Harms: Legislative Reforms in Australia and the UK.’ *MediaWrites*, 13 April, 2021: <https://mediawrites.law/update-on-online-harms-legislative-reforms-in-australia-and-the-uk/#page=1>.

<sup>195</sup> New Zealand Parliament. *Films, Video and Publications Classification (Urgent Interim Classification of Publications and Prevention of Online Harm) Amendment Bill*:

<https://www.legislation.govt.nz/bill/government/2020/0268/latest/d10731009e2.html>.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

Again, concerns have been expressed over a chilling effect on free speech, also that the proposed legislation could be used against legitimate activism.<sup>197</sup> Some live portrayals of violence may be in the public interest. For example, would footage such as the George Floyd murder have been removed under this law? The major tech platforms responded that the Bill must provide greater clarity moving forward if it is going to be implemented.<sup>198</sup>

In addition to the above, a comprehensive review of content regulation in New Zealand was announced by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Jan Tinetti, on 10 June 2021. The review is being managed by the Department of Internal Affairs, with support from the Ministry for Culture and Heritage. It aims to design and create a new modern, flexible and coherent regulatory framework to mitigate the harmful impacts of content, regardless of how it is delivered, while still protecting and enhancing democratic freedoms, including freedom of expression and freedom of the press.<sup>199</sup>

### US States

Not only did federal-level US legislators continue to grow their interest in amending Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA) in 2021, but two states also introduced their own legislative instruments. Both of the latter go to US conservatives' longstanding belief, in the face of evidence to the contrary, that technology companies are censoring them based on their politics.

In May 2021, Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis signed the Stop Social Media Censorship Act. Only months after former US President Trump was suspended from a number of platforms, the Act seeks to stop tech platforms from suspending the accounts of political candidates prior to elections and would also make it easier for users and the Florida Attorney General to legally challenge tech companies' moderation decisions. It states that platforms will be fined up to \$250,000 per day if found to violate the Act. In addition to being criticised as unconstitutional, the Act is also criticised as conflicting with the CDA's Section 230, which provides platforms with immunity from liability over their content moderation decisions.<sup>200</sup>

In September 2021, Texas introduced a bill with broadly similar purposes. The proposed Texas law would apply to social media companies with more than 50 million monthly active users in the United States, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. It would require them to produce reports on illegal or potentially policy-violating content, as well as build a complaint system via which users could challenge companies' content moderation decisions or flag illegal activity. In addition, users and the Texas Attorney General could file suit if they believed that tech companies wrongfully banned them. "It is now law that

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<sup>197</sup> Cameron Sumpter. 'Collaboration and Legislation: Confronting Online Violent Extremism from New Zealand.' *GNET*, 10 May, 2021: <https://gnet-research.org/2021/05/10/collaboration-and-legislation-confronting-online-violent-extremism-from-new-zealand/>.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> For more on this, go to the official New Zealand government page on the Review at <https://www.dia.govt.nz/media-and-online-content-regulation>.

<sup>200</sup> Gilad Edleman. 'Florida's New Social Media Law Will Be Laughed Out of Court.' *Wired*, 24 May, 2021: <https://www.wired.com/story/florida-new-social-media-law-laughed-out-of-court/>.

conservative viewpoints in Texas cannot be banned on social media,” Texas Governor Greg Abbott prematurely stated.<sup>201</sup>

In June, a US federal court judge blocked the Florida law from taking effect, suggesting it would be found unconstitutional after tech industry groups brought a challenge. The Florida Governor’s administration appealed the judge’s ruling. Tech industry groups have criticised the Texas law too, and the industry is likely to bring a similar challenge in Texas as they did in Florida to prevent it from taking effect.

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<sup>201</sup> Cat Zakrzewski. ‘Texas Governor Signs Bill Prohibiting Social Media Giants From Blocking Users Based on Viewpoint.’ *Washington Post*, 9 September, 2021:  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/09/09/govgregabbott-social-media-censorship-bill/>.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the number of right-wing and jihadi terrorist attacks in the West were down during the pandemic, partly due to restrictive measures limiting the chance for offline gatherings. However, there was continued high availability of extreme right content online during the year, despite a concerted crackdown associated with the 6 January, 2021 events on the US’s Capitol Hill. Official IS online content production and distribution continued to suffer and a concomitant increase in ‘fan’ content and activity was observable.

In terms of the narratives displayed in this content, the Covid-19 pandemic and associated measures remained a core component of content across the extreme right spectrum; in contrast, and unlike at the beginning of the pandemic, jihadi online content was largely focused elsewhere in 2021, including an IS concentration on Africa and continued jihadi encouragement of lone actor attacks in the West.

Sustained disruption of extreme right and jihadi content across not just major but a raft of medium-sized platforms—and a variety of other online services—meant that shifts to ever more niche platforms were discernible across both communities. The pace of government regulation efforts also stepped-up in 2021, with a raft of measures either introduced or continuing their progress through the legislative process during the year.

Finally, 12 things to watch for in the online and extremism and terrorism realms in 2022 are outlined in Box 4.

Box 4. Online Extremism and Terrorism: What to Watch for in 2022
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued extreme right exploitation of COVID-19, including online to offline trajectories;</li> <li>• Increasing online and ‘real world’ ideological and aesthetic crossover, both between ideological ‘sets’ (e.g., incels-extreme right, QAnon-extreme right, ecology-extreme right) and across ideologies (e.g., far-right-Salafis);<sup>202</sup></li> <li>• Continued targeting of women (e.g., QAnon via beauty and wellness online influencers and communities) and youth (e.g., via gaming and adjacent platforms);</li> <li>• More reliance on audio (e.g., Clubhouse, Spotify, Twitter) by extremists and terrorists due to their insufficient content moderation guidelines, personnel, and tools;</li> <li>• Similarly to websites, an increasing reliance on resurfaced ‘old’ technology, such as email newsletter services (e.g., Substack), by extremists and terrorists due, again, to these services relative inattention to content moderation;</li> <li>• The emergence of new online platforms and services attractive to extremists and terrorists but with no strategies in place to deal with these—and other—harms;</li> <li>• Increasing exploitation of the federated or decentralised web (i.e., the ‘Dweb’);</li> <li>• Continued financial profiting by, especially, extreme right influencers from their online activity;</li> <li>• Increasing reliance on, especially privacy-preserving, cryptocurrency and other online payment mechanisms for fundraising, donations, and payments;</li> <li>• The implementation of relevant new legislation, especially the EU’s TCO Regulation;</li> <li>• The progress of relevant measures already-in-train through the legislative process, especially the EU’s Digital Services Act (DSA);</li> <li>• The tabling of relevant new regulatory measures globally, including outside of the Western democratic sphere (e.g., India).</li> </ul>

<sup>202</sup> See, for example, Moustafa Ayad. 2021. *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures* (London: ISD): <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Islamogram.pdf>.

**APPENDIX 1**

<b>Overview of 14 Facebook Oversight Board (FOB) Cases and Decisions with Hate, Extremism, and/or Terrorism Components 2021</b>			
<i>FOB-supplied Alpha-Numerical Identifier</i>	<i>2021 Decision Date</i>	<i>FOB-assigned Tags</i>	<i>FOB Decision</i>
1. 2020-002-FB-UA	28 Jan.	Myanmar, France, China, <b>Hate speech</b> , Politics, Religion, Violence	<b>“Overturned</b> Facebook’s decision to remove a post under its Hate Speech Community Standard. The Board found that, while the post might be considered offensive, it did not reach the level of hate speech.”
2. 2020-003-FB-UA	28 Jan.	Armenia, Azerbaijan, <b>Hate speech</b> , Culture, Discrimination, Religion	<b>“Upheld</b> Facebook’s decision to remove a post containing a demeaning slur which violated Facebook’s Community Standard on Hate Speech.”
3. 2020-005-FB-UA	28 Jan.	United States, <b>Dangerous individuals and organizations</b> , Politics	<b>“Overturned</b> Facebook’s decision overturned Facebook’s decision to remove a post which the company claims violated its Community Standard on Dangerous Individuals and Organizations. The Board found that these rules were not made sufficiently clear to users.”
4. 2020-006-FB-FBR	28 Jan.	France, <b>Violence and incitement</b> , Health, Misinformation, Safety	<b>“Overturned</b> Facebook’s decision to remove a post which it claimed, “contributes to the risk of imminent... physical harm.” The Board found Facebook’s misinformation and imminent harm rule (part of its Violence and Incitement Community Standard) to be inappropriately vague and recommended, among other things, that the company create a new Community Standard on health misinformation.”
5. 2020-007-FB-FBR	12 Feb.	France, India, <b>Violence and incitement</b> , Religion, Violence	<b>“Overturned</b> Facebook’s decision to remove a post under its Violence and Incitement Community Standard. While the company considered that the post contained a veiled threat, a majority of the Board believed it should be restored.”
6. 2021-002-FB-UA	13 Apr.	Netherlands, <b>Hate speech</b> , Culture, Children / Children’s rights, Photography	<b>“Upheld</b> Facebook’s decision to remove specific content that violated the express prohibition on posting caricatures of Black people in the form of blackface, contained in its Hate Speech Community Standard.”
7. 2021-003-FB-UA	29 Apr.	India, <b>Dangerous individuals and organizations</b> , Politics	<b>“Overturned</b> Facebook’s decision to remove a post under its Dangerous Individuals and Organizations Community Standard. After the Board identified this case for review, Facebook restored the content. The Board expressed concerns that Facebook did not review the user’s appeal against its original decision. The Board also urged the company to take action to avoid mistakes which silence the voices of religious minorities.”

8. 2021-001-FB-FBR	5 May	United States, <b>Dangerous individuals and organizations</b> , Freedom of expression, Politics, Safety	“ <b>Upheld</b> Facebook’s decision on January 7, 2021, to restrict then-President Donald Trump’s access to posting content on his Facebook page and Instagram account.”
9. 2021-006-IG-UA	8 Jul.	United States, Turkey, <b>Dangerous individuals and organizations</b> , Freedom of expression, Marginalized communities, Misinformation	“ <b>Overtured</b> Facebook’s original decision to remove an Instagram post encouraging people to discuss the solitary confinement of Abdullah Öcalan, a founding member of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). After the user appealed and the Board selected the case for review, Facebook concluded that the content was removed in error and restored it. The Board is concerned that Facebook misplaced an internal policy exception for three years and that this may have led to many other posts being wrongly removed.”
10. 2021-007-FB-UA	11 Aug.	Myanmar, <b>Hate speech</b> , Freedom of expression, Politics	“ <b>Overtured</b> Facebook’s decision to remove a post in Burmese under its Hate Speech Community Standard. The Board found that the post did not target Chinese people, but the Chinese state. Specifically, it used profanity to reference Chinese governmental policy in Hong Kong as part of a political discussion on the Chinese government’s role in Myanmar.”
11. 2021-008-FB-FBR	19 Aug.	Brazil, <b>Violence and incitement</b> , Governments, Health	“ <b>Upheld</b> Facebook’s decision to leave up a post by a state-level medical council in Brazil which claimed that lockdowns are ineffective and had been condemned by the World Health Organization (WHO). The Board found that Facebook’s decision to keep the content on the platform was consistent with its content policies. The Board found that the content contained some inaccurate information which raises concerns considering the severity of the pandemic in Brazil and the council’s status as a public institution. However, the Board found that the content did not create a risk of imminent harm and should, therefore, stay on the platform.”
12. 2021-009-FB-UA	14 Sep.	Israel, Egypt, <b>Dangerous individuals and organizations</b> , News events, Journalism, War and conflict	“ <b>Agrees that Facebook was correct</b> to reverse its original decision to remove content on Facebook that shared a news post about a threat of violence from the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing of the Palestinian group Hamas. Facebook originally removed the content under the Dangerous Individuals and Organizations Community Standard, and restored it after the Board selected this case for review. The Board concludes that removing the content did not



			reduce offline harm and restricted freedom of expression on an issue of public interest.”
13. 2021-010-FB-UA	27 Sep.	Colombia, <b>Hate speech</b> , Community organizations, Freedom of expression, Protests	“ <b>Overtuned</b> Facebook’s decision to remove a post showing a video of protesters in Colombia criticizing the country’s president, Ivan Duque. In the video, the protesters use a word designated as a slur under Facebook’s Hate Speech Community Standard. Assessing the public interest value of this content, the Board found that Facebook should have applied the newsworthiness allowance in this case.”
14. 2021-011-FB-UA	28 Sep.	South Africa, <b>Hate speech</b> , Governments, Marginalized communities, Politics	“ <b>Upheld</b> Facebook’s decision to remove a post discussing South African society under its Hate Speech Community Standard. The Board found that the post contained a slur which, in the South African context, was degrading, excluding and harmful to the people it targeted.