

## Research perspective

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The slightly scary privilege falls to me to open proceedings, and to say that I rarely have a chance to address an audience of such distinction and accomplishment. It is, truly, an honour to talk to you all today.

I am Carl Miller, Research Director of the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM) at the British political think tank Demos. And I see on the programme that I'm here to talk about 'research'.

There is one kind of research that fascinates us at CASM: social media research. Indeed, it is ironic that in this first session I am to talk about the 'reality on the ground' when the *reality* is that so much of reality is now off the ground: on the Internet and especially social media.

And it is in understanding what this transfer of our lives onto digital social space means – to radical political engagement generally and online hate speech specifically – that I'm here to talk about today.

So, in fifteen short minutes, I will give you three things:

- The results of the first ever survey into the far right social media groups in Europe.
- What this means for online hate speech
- A few things we may want to do about it.

For brevity's sake we are going to focus on the far right. I understand that hate speech is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon with many different aspects, and actors, but, with only fifteen minutes, I am going to restrict the scope to the far right.

### The key message

The key message I've come today to give you is that social media is changing the nature of radical political engagement.

Radicals have always been early adopters of new forms of communications. They are often shunned by mainstream forums, and traditional outlets. Disgruntled, they look for new ways of communicating, and found social media.

The first stat for you today is that for mainstream groups, the ratio of formal members to facebook members is three-to-one. For every one facebook member there are three formal members. For far right groups, that ratio is reversed: there are three facebook members for every formal member.

Radical groups in general, and this includes far right groups, are using social media to:

- Get their message out
- Organise and collaborate amongst themselves
- Recruit new members.

### The New Face of Digital Populism

Last year, we realised Facebook membership of the far right was growing, and fast. But Who were they? What did they think? This is what the Demos report *The New Face of Digital Populism* – available on Demos' website – set out to answer.

I don't have time to go into the methodology at depth. Basically, Facebook makes money through advertising. It lets advertisers define who they want to advertise to, based on what the person does on Facebook itself. So, if you want to sell trainers, you might target people who like various sports groups. We did exactly the same for the Far Right.

This method generated 13,000 useable responses across 11 European groups – from CasaPound to Die Freiheit. A remarkable response.

We asked them who they were, what they thought about society and politics and their place within it, and about the relationship between online and offline activism.

For brevity's sake, I will only present the five key findings – there are many others – in a hopefully suspense-creating increasing order of interest.

- First, Far right Facebook groups are overwhelmingly young and male (around 60-70%, depending on the group). So far, so cliché.
- Second, they were not particularly unemployed or uneducated.
- Third, their key concern was that their identity was under threat and that no-one else cares about it. Their identity, they feel, is under threat from immigration, from Islam and from a cowardly liberal elite.
- Fourthly, and getting very interesting now: the average levels of what we call 'generalized trust' – trust in our fellow man, was the same as probably the average of this room. But their institutional trust – trust in the social and political institutions that define and structure our lives was markedly lower, 30% lower.



- Fifthly, and most importantly, Facebook Far Right members are not just clicktivists. They are more likely to vote, protest, and most formal members of the group are also Facebook members. Here's another stat for you: 1/5 Far Right Facebook members had protested in the last six months. In the general population, this figure would be less than 10%.

### What does this mean?

So, we've seen the emergence of this new and increasingly important platform of collaboration, communication and organisation for the far right. What does this mean for online hatespeech?

To give you my view, lets begin with the trust in media score. The far right, with there backs already turned to the mainstream media, are now turning to each other, to the world of user-generated content that they actually trust more.

This is problematic. The people that comprise our social networks, offline and also on social media, are almost always similar to us. So, we surround ourselves with homogenous, like-minded fellow-travellers that share our essential views. As social media increasingly mediates, filters and dictates the information that we encounter, we therefore, in social media, inhabit universes of information that agree with our basic, fundamental beliefs more often than they disagree with them.

When everyone shares the same view – especially when this view are things like *“all Muslims are extremists”* *“all Governments are corrupt”* you have an echo-chamber. In these echo chambers, these views are corroborated and supported again and again in a process that leads everyone to hold more extreme views.

These echo-chambers, Balkanized pockets of mono-opinion, with few or no dissenting opinion are the breeding grounds for hate and hate-speech.

It happens offline too, but social media, in the way I've just described, exacerbates the problem.

### What to do?

I'm only a humble researcher, and these issues raise some very big questions about our social and political organisation. I'll leave these big questions to those in this room far more accomplished, and with far more of a mandate, to answer them.

Instead, I have two quite limited and specific suggestions:

The first is the citizen response: critical thinking skills fit for a digital age have never been more important. At least partially, you can consider the decision to join the Far Right an intellectual process: of weighing up evidence and assessing certain things claimed to be truths.

This being at least partially the case, you can view Far Right membership as part of a wider failure to critically and savvily consume the information we encounter on the Internet – including poor health information, conspiracy theories, bogus academia and other pieces of misinformation often artfully packed to look like fact.

We are all now our own gatekeepers of truth. There are challenges of particularly the digital terrain – like the echo-chambers I mentioned earlier - that we need the skills and habits to mitigate.

In another Demos report, *Truth, Lies and the Internet*, I've argued that at least the British education system is not equipping young people with these skills.

The second is the technology response. The explosion of social media is a boon for researchers. That's why the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at Demos exists.

But social media is also overwhelmingly complex, huge, and dynamic. We are working on the tools to understand it, and meaningfully generate proper empirical evidence to inform our responses to problems we find on it, and due to it.

Most relevant for the topic today is an online hate speech identifier that can automatically and at great scale and speed identify genuine examples of hate speech. Only tools like this, capable of dealing with the size and dynamism of social media, can truly tell us how big the problem of hate speech is, who is being targeted, and how this might affect offline behaviour.

### Closing remarks

And to wrap up, one final thought. The truth is, for all the anecdotes one hears, there is still so much online, and especially on social media, that we don't know. If our responses to online hate are to be evidence-led, to be smart and informed, we have got to get better at the fundamental task of understanding social media to its full, bewildering, extent.

Thank you. It's be a pleasure to talk to you today.