

Extreme right activists build transnational narratives online

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The threat posed by the extreme right has gained greater prominence in 2019. Mark Wilson surveys the online extreme-right landscape, examines the narratives being deployed among users from different countries, and assesses how these communities are likely to evolve

Key Points

- The internet is providing a platform for extreme right-wing narratives and activists to coalesce across national borders.
- Extreme right-wing supporters are gravitating towards lesser-known parts of the surface web and displaying greater security awareness, which is likely to make them harder to track.
- Alternative social media networks championing free speech are acting as echo chambers for extreme far-right ideology, increasing the risk of online radicalisation.

Two attacks on mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March refocused attention on the threat posed by the extreme right wing. The attacks underlined how the internet is aiding this threat by giving the extreme right a means to transcend national borders. The alleged Christchurch assailant, Australian Brenton Tarrant, livestreamed the attack on Facebook. In the aftermath of the attack, the footage quickly appeared on a range of alternative online platforms popular with extreme right-wing supporters and activists, such as the social media networks Gab and Minds (see box below), the messaging boards 4chan, 8chan, and Stormfront, and the video-sharing website BitChute.

The internet has long been a news-dissemination tool for the extreme right, but open-source research by *Jane's* shows how they are increasingly using the online space to transnationalise their agenda. The process is not led by any one individual or organisation, but by networks of activists in different countries who use a range of alternative social media platforms and websites to focus on issues that cut across national borders. In some cases, these extremists are linked by their discussion of the same topics, while in others their links are operational.

Monitoring extreme right-wing activity across a range of online platforms, *Jane's* has identified three narratives of the extreme far right's developing online transnational agenda. First is the counter-Islamist narrative, with extremists in several countries fomenting alarm at what they perceive as the 'Islamisation of the West'. Second is the anti-political

establishment narrative, with extreme right-wing activists attempting to use the gilets jaunes ('yellow vests') protests in Europe to advance their agenda. Third is their focus on the US-based Antifa (anti-fascist) movement, for which activists inside and outside the US have a shared hatred.

In terms of extreme right-wing transnational operational links, extremist forum and social media users share skills on how to stay online in the face of security crackdowns, signpost each other to lesser-known parts of the surface web, and appear to mimic each other's use of cryptocurrency to generate funding for their activities.

Counter Islamist

The Christchurch attacks are the most recent examples of how ideas linked with countering Islamist extremism now feature prominently in extreme right-wing ideology. Hours before the attack, the alleged assailant posted a so-called manifesto on 8chan. The manifesto was entitled 'The Great Replacement', a reference to a far-right conspiracy theory that asserts that Europe's white population is being systematically replaced by non-European migrants. In the manifesto, Tarrant described his "anti-Islamic" motivation for the attacks, as well as his desire for revenge against Islam for "1,300 years of war and devastation that it has brought upon the people of the West".



A police officer stands guard outside the Linwood Islamic Centre in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 23 March 2019; the centre remained closed despite the reopening of the city's Al Noor mosque. The attacks on two mosques on 15 March refocused international attention on the threat posed by the extreme right wing. (William West/AFP/Getty Images)

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Tarrant's emphasis on the 'Great Replacement' echoed narratives espoused in other extreme right-wing communities, such as the identitarian movement. Generation Identity, a far-right, Europe-wide, identitarian organisation that describes itself as a non-violent student movement, states on its website that its core aims are to "stop and reverse the Great Replacement", and to "stop the Islamisation of Europe".

The online reaction to the Christchurch attacks revealed a range of connected extreme right-wing activity. On 4chan, forum users claiming to be from France, Norway, Romania, the UK, and the US used a single message thread to praise the attacks hours after they occurred. US supporters posted footage of the attacks and Tarrant's manifesto in the thread and urged other users to spread the content further.

On Gab, a UK-focused extreme right-wing supporter claimed that the attacks were the result of rising anger in the West at unchecked migration to Western countries. The supporter posted this message in 'The Anglosphere', a Gab group that encourages fellow extremists from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, the UK, and the US, to connect.

Elsewhere on Gab, extreme right-wing activists used the attack to incite more violence against Muslims. On 16 March, a Europe-focused extremist described the attack as a "mosque cleansing" and encouraged the extreme right wing in the US and Europe to perpetrate copycat attacks. The extremist linked ideas around counter-Islamist narratives to the more traditional extreme right-wing issue of anti-Semitism, arguing that future attacks should also target Jews.

On 15 March, a Europe-based neo-Nazi group known as the Feuerkrieg Division warned that "Christchurch is just the beginning". The group used its Gab account to repost footage, memes, and images of the attacks that were originally posted by US, Canadian, and UK users, respectively. This demonstrates how networks of extreme right-wing supporters and activists across countries are contributing to promoting the counter-Islamist narrative.

Extreme right-wing ideas of counter-Islamism as a reaction to the "Islamisation of the West" are also found on Minds. On 18 October 2018, a US-focused activist called "Jihad Countermeasures" took advantage of Minds' blogging platform to publish a step-by-step plan for removing Muslims from the US. The account had 6,532 subscribers and was followed by Minds users claiming to be from Canada, the UK, and the US, showing how the counter-Islamist narrative links extremists in different countries.

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