

Layers of Lies: A First Look at Irish Far-Right Activity on Telegram





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About This Report

This report aims to provide a first look into Irish far-right activity on the messaging app, Telegram, where the movement is operating both as identifiable groups and influencers, and anonymously-run channels and groups. The report looks at the activity across 34 such Telegram channels through the lens of a series of case studies where content posted on these channels resulted in real life consequences. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the report examines the tactics, language and trends within these channels, providing much-needed detail on the activity of the Irish far-right online.

This report was produced in conjunction with TheJournal.ie and its investigative platform Noteworthy.ie as part of their Eyes Right series, examining the growth of far-right ideology on Irish online networks, and its influence on wider public opinion.¹

NOTEWORTHY

About ISD

Founded in 2006, ISD is now the leading global “think and do” tank dedicated to understanding and innovating real-world responses to the rising tide of polarisation, hate and extremism of all forms. We combine anthropological research, expertise in international extremist movements and an advanced digital analysis capability that tracks hate, disinformation and extremism online, with policy advisory support and training to governments and cities around the world. We also work to empower youth and community influencers internationally through our pioneering education, technology and communications programmes.

Innovating, trialling and scaling data-driven solutions across our unique networks of community influencers, city and government officials and tech sector partnerships, we work to mount a soft power strategy, proportional in influence and impact to the evermore sophisticated, cross-border polarisation and recruitment machineries of state and non-state actors promulgating hate, division and conflict.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our ISD colleagues Cooper Gatewood, Chloe Colliver, Jacob Davey, Sarah Kennedy and Sasha Havlicek for their support, feedback and revisions to this report.

We would also like to thank our partners on this project, Susan Daly, Ian Curran, Cónal Thomas, Garreth MacNamee and everyone at TheJournal.ie and Noteworthy.

We would also like to thank Jo Johnson for her copy editing of this report.

Any mistakes or omissions are the authors' own.

Contents

Glossary	6
Executive Summary	7
Key Findings	8
Methodology	9
Case Study 1: The Shooting of George Nkencho, 30 December 2020	11
Case Study 2: The Balbriggan House Fire, 9 August 2020	15
Case Study 3: Homophobic Campaign Against Roderic O’Gorman, July 2020	18
Case Study 4: Activity of Far-Right Groups at Anti-Mask Protest, 12 September 2020	21
Case Study 5: Investigating the Influence of Far-Right Activity among COVID-19 Telegram Channels	24
Conclusion	27
References	28

Glossary

Conspiracy theory

A theory which seeks to explain a phenomenon by invoking a sinister plot orchestrated by powerful actors. Conspiracies are painted as secret or esoteric, with adherents to a theory seeing themselves as the initiated few who have access to hidden knowledge. Adherents to conspiracy theories usually see themselves as in direct opposition to the powers who are orchestrating the ploy.²

Far-right communities

ISD's definition of far-right is in line with right-wing extremism expert Cas Mudde. He has defined the term as groups and individuals that support or endorse political or social belief systems that feature at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy and strong state advocacy.³ Mudde's definition of "far-right" includes both radical right-wing and extreme right-wing actors. Mudde states that both radical and extreme right-wing actors believe that "inequalities between people are natural and positive," but have differing attitudes towards democracy.⁴ Radical right-wing actors are not against democracy in principle, while extreme right-wing actors reject democracy as a form of government.⁵

Far or radical left

Groups, actions or networks typically rooted in Marxist, socialist or anarchist ideologies, that pursue an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-fascist agenda, often with an internationalist outlook.

Ethnonationalism

A form of nationalism where the nation is defined in terms of ethnicity. Central to ethnonationalism is the belief that nations are tied together by a shared heritage and culture that is based on ethnicity.

White supremacy

Defined by ISD as "the belief in the superiority of white over non-white, and that white people should be politically and socially dominant over non-white people. This can extend to a belief in the need for violence against, or even the genocide of, non-white people."⁶

False flag operation

This is an act carried out to deceive observers and disguise the source behind the action with the aim of blame being attributed to another person/group.

Executive Summary

In 2020, Irish far-right groups, influencers and supporters made Telegram one of their primary online platforms. Compared to 2019, when a handful of Irish far-right channels posted just over 800 messages, 60,377 messages were posted by 34 channels in 2020.

This report illustrates how Telegram has evolved among far-right groups and supporters in Ireland from a fringe platform to become one of the main online spaces used by many of these entities to communicate, promote content, spread disinformation, organise and mobilise.

Telegram has limited content moderation policies and only bans content that promotes violence on public channels or distributes illegal pornographic material.⁷ Telegram surpassed 500 million users in January 2021 after a boost in popularity due to growing anxieties over privacy concerns and claims of perceived censorship on platforms like Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook.⁸

In recent years, Telegram has become a key communication tool used by radical and extremist groups across the world. In 2019, Telegram worked with the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Interpol) to take down thousands of ISIS-related accounts.⁹ A previous ISD study also examined how the platform is used by white supremacists to post a range of extremist material, glorify terrorism and share guides that help individuals prepare for violence.¹⁰

Although Irish far-right groups have failed to make gains in recent general elections, far-right supporters online have used social platforms as a tool to foster hatred and spread disinformation related to minority groups and individuals, as highlighted in media coverage and a recent report from the advocacy group HOPE not hate.¹¹ ^{12, 13} Groups and individuals associated with Irish far-right movements were also central to the organisation and promotion of anti-mask and anti-lockdown protests throughout 2020.¹⁴

To better understand the nature of Irish far-right activity on Telegram and the trends, tactics and themes favoured by these communities, ISD analysed 34 Telegram channels that promote far-right, ethnonationalist, anti-immigrant, and/or anti-minority ideologies. These channels have a combined membership of 22,591 users. However, accounting for private channels or chat groups beyond the scope of this analysis, the number of Telegram users active in Irish far-right communities is likely much higher. ISD studied the communications in these channels through the lens of five key events and trends to provide greater insights on how the Irish far-right uses Telegram.

This research highlights how Irish far-right communities publish and share verifiably false, misleading, defamatory and threatening information concerning migrants, people of colour, women or members of the LGBTQ+ community in Ireland through their communications on Telegram. The administrators of these Telegram channels use language and tactics commonly seen in US and international far-right movements and display the same ardent efforts to promote division and conflict.

Telegram is used by far-right entities in Ireland to attack perceived opponents in the media and launch targeted harassment and smear campaigns against others. Furthermore, our analysis also found that almost one-in-ten messages posted by Irish anti-lockdown and COVID-19 conspiracy theory Telegram channels originated from far-right sources, highlighting a concerning intersection that may fuel radicalisation, extremism or violence.

Key Findings

- **ISD researchers identified 34 Irish Telegram channels used to promote ethnonationalist, far-right content.** These channels support nativist nationalist ideologies, promote conspiracy theories targeting political opponents, direct hate towards ethnic and religious minorities, disseminate COVID-19 misinformation and some also support violence against the state.
 - **Irish ethnonationalist, far-right channels actively encourage followers to spread disinformation.** As seen in the case studies about George Nkencho and Roderic O’Gorman, these channels support the targeting of individuals with misleading or offensive content with the aim of fostering hatred or hostility.
 - **82% of all the messages sent by these channels were sent in 2020.** Out of 73,274 messages, 60,377 were sent in 2020. In 2019, this number was just 801, representing an enormous increase of 7,438% in just one year among these communities.
 - **The largest Telegram channel discovered by ISD has over 5,400 followers and the smallest channel has 14 followers.** The average number of followers for a Telegram channel was 781 users. The 34 Telegram channels have a combined membership of 22,591 users, though, accounting for private channels or chat groups beyond the scope of this analysis, the number of Telegram users active in Irish far-right communities is likely higher.
 - **These channels rely heavily on image and video content.** 25% of posts we identified did not feature any text, highlighting the high frequency of image and video-based posts among these Telegram channels. ISD’s analysis primarily focused on text content posted and hosted by these Telegram channels, but the large proportion of visual content raises important considerations for content moderation efforts and research considerations.
 - **Far-right material is intersecting with Irish anti-lockdown and COVID-19 conspiracy theory Telegram channels.** In nine such COVID-related channels identified as part of this research, 9% of all messages posted by these channels originated from a far-right source.
 - **Hostility towards mainstream media and researchers is a core component of the Irish far-right.** As seen in the case studies about George Nkencho and an anti-mask rally in September 2020, attacks, false claims and harassment campaigns were levelled against the media and extremism researchers working to report on and analyse these incidents.
 - **The case studies suggest that far-right actors are orchestrating information campaigns as entry points to push wider racist conspiracies.** As seen in the case studies about Balbriggan and Roderic O’Gorman, Irish far-right Telegram channels used these events to push wider campaigns of racist and homophobic disinformation about people of colour and members of the LGBTQ+ communities.
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Methodology

ISD started the channel identification process with three public Telegram channels associated with Irish ethnonationalist content. These were discovered by searching Telegram for public channels whose names featured keywords identifying them as Irish-based or focused on Ireland, and vetting for groups relevant to far-right extremism. Telegram channels often share material that links to related public channels that share the same interests, ideologies or audiences. Therefore, we used the three initial channels as content seeds, employing a “snowball” methodology to identify related, ideologically similar public communities, which we then incorporated into our analysis.

The first stage of the “snowball” methodology involved identifying the origin channels of content that was shared into the three seed channels. The second stage identified channels directly recommended by the three seed channels in their posts or lists. ISD researchers vetted all of these additional possible channels of interest to identify those that featured ethnonationalist and far-right content.

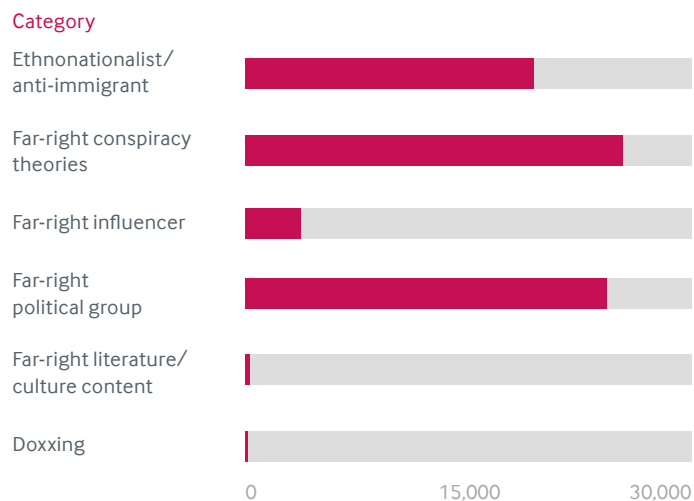
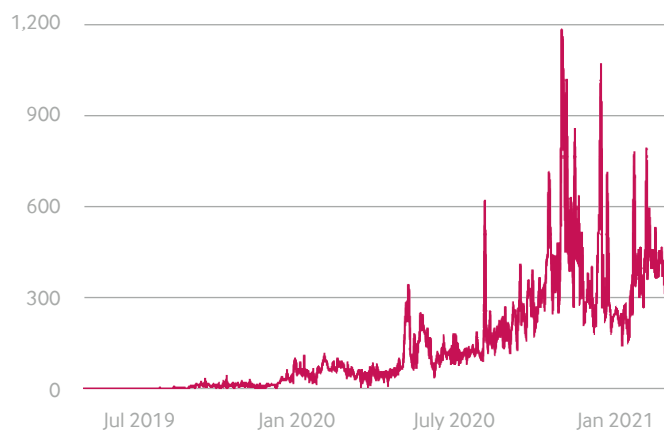
Using this methodology, we identified 60 related channels and refined this to 34 channels in total, ranging in size from 14 to 5,472 followers, that were expressing support for far-right, ethnonationalist ideologies in an Irish context. Within these channels, researchers identified two distinct categories of channel: discussion threads that enabled group chats within a community; and one-to-many content banks that served as repositories for ideological content that typically featured misleading, false and incendiary material.

This research focused on examining the nature of extremist communities active in Ireland that use Telegram. Based on qualitative analysis of the content in the identified channels, we additionally defined channels according to the categorisation outlined below.

- **Ethnonationalist/anti-immigrant channels:** These channels promote Irish nativist nationalist ideologies, feature racist memes, share anti-immigrant viewpoints or glorify violence or intimidation against ethnic minorities in Ireland.
- **Far-right conspiracy theories:** These channels promote conspiracy theories related to non-Christian religions and/or non-white and ethnic minorities in Ireland, and use these to promote radical and extremist political ideologies.
- **Far-right influencer:** These channels are run by political activists and content creators who use the platform to promote content that espouses nationalist ideologies and far-right conspiracy theories and amplifies racial hatred towards ethnic minorities.
- **Far-right political groups:** These channels are run by political parties and organisations that promote radical right-wing ideologies, including the support for Irish nativist nationalism, ultranationalist Catholic heritage, and rejection of multiculturalism, the LGBTQ+ community or non-Catholic religions.
- **Literature/content:** This channel serves as a repository for material that promotes nativist Irish heritage, literature and culture.
- **Doxxing:** This channel serves to share content and information that identifies and targets people who are characterised as opponents or critics of the ideology of the channel.

Table 1 Showing the breakdown of Telegram channels per category.

Category	Number of channels/groups	Total membership
Ethnonationalist/anti-immigrant	17	12,011
Far-right conspiracy theories	7	1,840
Far-right influencer	6	7,571
Far-right political group	2	989
Far-right literature/culture content	1	165
Doxxing	1	15

Fig 1 Volume of messages sent per channel category.**Fig 2** Volume of messages sent over time from July 2019 – February 2021.

Case Study 1

The Shooting of George Nkencho, 30 December 2020

Background

On 30 December 2020, news reports emerged of a fatal Gardaí-involved (police) shooting in a residential estate in Clonée, Co. Dublin.¹⁵ The victim was named as 27-year-old George Nkencho, a Dubliner of Nigerian heritage. Shortly after news of the shooting broke, videos began spreading online showing Nkencho, who suffered from mental health issues, brandishing a kitchen knife and lunging at Gardaí outside his home in Manorfields Drive.¹⁶ News reports stated that Nkencho had earlier assaulted a local shop worker before making his way back to Manorfields on foot, where Gardaí attempted to first resolve the situation using a taser and pepper spray.

In the hours and days following the incident, claims circulated widely online that attempted to frame Nkencho as a violent criminal with multiple convictions. These claims were found to be false.¹⁷ At the time, a news organisation reported that authorities said that they feared people on the far-right and far-left were attempting to use Nkencho's death to incite racial division.¹⁸ In the days following the incident, Nkencho's family spoke about his death and said he "needed help, not bullets" and stated that they did not believe the shooting was race-related but rather class-related.¹⁹ Due to the disinformation that circulated about Nkencho, his family was the subject of violent, hate-filled threats and said that they no longer felt safe in their home.²⁰

Summary

- Within hours of news breaking of the shooting, Irish far-right Telegram channels were sharing clear instructions to their members on how best to react to the shooting to stir up racial tensions, including by spreading disinformation and targeted hate.
- The language and phraseology used by these channels is associated with US and international far-right and white supremacist ideology.
- Left-wing politicians were frequently mentioned and targeted with hate within these discussions as a result of sympathies they expressed towards the family, including Lord Mayor of Dublin Hazel Chu, who was mentioned in 16% of messages.
- Irish far-right channels attempted to smear disinformation researchers as being responsible for spreading false claims.

Top stats

- ISD recorded **4,397 posts across 28 Telegram channels** in the week following the shooting of George Nkencho, with 3,072 of these consisting of text-based messages.
- Of these text-based messages, **22% were specifically discussing the shooting of George Nkencho.**
- The posts about Nkencho were sent in **21 Telegram channels**, 17 of which were categorised as ethnonationalist/anti-immigrant and four which were categorised as channels sharing far-right conspiracy theories.

'Make memes... and get trolling': Racist disinformation orchestrated on Telegram

Within one hour of the first reports of the fatal Gardai-involved shooting of George Nkencho on 30 December, Telegram channels associated with Ireland's far-right and anti-immigrant movements began sharing videos of the shooting and informed their followers that an "African" had been shot dead after an altercation with the public and Gardaí. Shortly after this, the victim was described as a "dumb cunt" and screenshots of online tributes to Nkencho posted by others on different social platforms were shared on Telegram along with added racial slurs and memes that named the shooter as "National Party member Seamus O'Hyde." This is a meme regularly used on the white supremacist imageboard 4chan in the aftermath of mass shootings in the US to trick journalists and others into reporting and sharing false information.²¹

Five hours after the news broke, clear directions were posted across Telegram channels that instructed followers how to react to the shooting incident. Followers were told to avoid going to protests or getting into discussions with people about the incident. Instead, they were told, "stay home. . . make memes, dig up stats, turn on your VPN and get trolling".

The directions also included instructions on how to use the shooting to stir up racial tensions with others on social media. The message said that "joggers" are "not capable of logical reactions, they only think emotionally and have zero impulse control". 'Joggers', in this context, is a racial slur used to describe people of colour that originated as a meme on 4chan following the fatal shooting of Ahmaud Arbery in the US in February 2020.²² The solution, the author of the Telegram message said, is to "abuse them [Black people angered over the shooting of Nkencho] (anonymously) on Twitter and Instagram and fuel the chimp out". This, they hoped, would lead to people taking their anger onto the streets to directing it towards the Gardaí.

Fig 3 Clear instructions posted in far-right Telegram channels on how to react to the shooting.

Drill gangs promising retribution. NGOs organising protests. Libs/reds triggered. Chimps about to start chimping.

When the joggers start taking out Gardaí and torching buildings the normies will lose sympathy for them.

Sit back and enjoy the fireworks.

DO NOT GET INVOLVED

Glowies/G2/reds will encourage fedposting at the protests/riots that will inevitably happen.

DON'T ENGAGE

Let the joggers jog and the normies will realise they are not capable of civilisation.

Enjoy the memes, stay home.

STAY AWAY FROM PROTESTS

Don't get into arguments at work. If someone brings it up just act dumb, pretend you never heard of it and change the subject.

"But I really want to do something"

Joggers are not capable of logical reactions, they only think emotionally and have zero impulse control. Abuse them (anonymously) on Twitter and Instagram to fuel the chimp out. If you annoy them online they'll take that anger onto the streets and direct it at An Garda Síochána.

Make memes, dig up stats, turn on your VPN and get trolling.

223 17:51

Disinformation spreads beyond George Nkencho

In the immediate hours and days following the shooting, disinformation campaigns were launched from these channels focusing on Nkencho, his family, the Gardaí, the African community in Ireland, politicians and disinformation researchers.

Several different false claims related to the Gardaí were circulated on the channels. Initially, ethnonationalist/anti-immigrant channels proposed spreading the claim that the Garda officer who shot Nkencho was an “Eastern European LGBT ban [female] Garda” and encouraged followers to incorporate these details into the narratives that they were spreading online. Such messages included instructions to push “both narratives” – claims of a “Gaelic supremacist attacking a foreigner” and a “white liberal attacking a homophobe”, showing the tendency of these movements to attempt to stir up any kind of racial or ethnic tensions.

After the actual Garda officer’s identity was shared online, the groups shifted from smearing the Gardaí to defending the police force and claiming that “BLM terrorists” were sharing the officer’s identity. They also attempted to smear a slew of left-wing politicians and claimed that “Hazel Chu, Paul Murphy, Alan Kelly and Saoirse McHugh support this” – (“this” meaning the supposed illicit sharing of the officer’s identity).

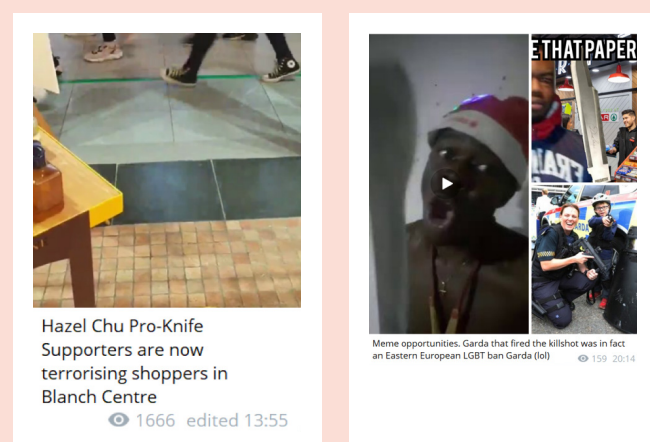
Disinformation specifically about Nkencho began to circulate early in the conversation, with false claims alleging that he had “39 convictions” and that he had beaten up his girlfriend with a hammer and “robbed numerous other people”. These claims were all found to be false, as reported in a fact-check by TheJournal.ie and elsewhere, but spread widely online across platforms.²³

Left-wing politicians and political figures were frequently mentioned, smeared and targeted in these discussions. Lord Mayor of Dublin Hazel Chu was mentioned in 16% of all text-based posts analysed within Nkencho conversations. Chu is a consistent target of Irish far-right activists over her

support for left-wing political ideologies and her Chinese heritage.²⁴ Chu was frequently referred to as “Pro-Knife Hazel Chu” among far-right channels within the data set after she tweeted her sympathies to the family of George Nkencho. The channels also used this term to refer to BLM activists protesting in the days after the shooting.

Other politicians including Paul Murphy, Bríd Smith, Aodhán Ó Ríordáin and Ruth Coppinger were also mentioned after they expressed sympathies with the family of George Nkencho in the aftermath of the shooting.

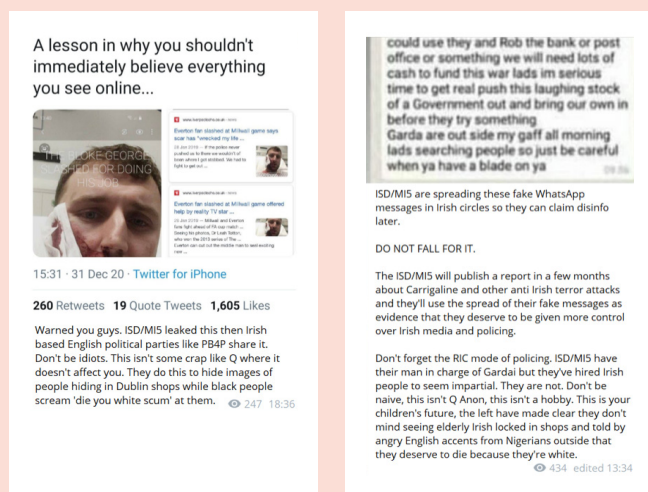
Fig 4 Disinformation and targeted hate arising from the shooting.



Groups attempt to blame disinformation on researchers

The day after the shooting, far-right and ethnonationalist Telegram channels began to spread claims that many disinformation researchers, including the authors of this report, were “leaking fake pics to nationalists to spread disinformation”. In support of this allegation, these channels shared a photo that they claimed showed the injuries sustained by the shop worker in an attack before Nkencho’s death. In fact, the image has no relation to this incident and actually showed an Everton football club fan who was attacked before an FA Cup game in January 2019, as reported by TheJournal.ie.²⁵ It also confirmed that the shop worker who was attacked was not stabbed or slashed with a knife during the assault, as claimed by Irish far-right groups, but did sustain facial injuries.

Fig 5 Attempts by groups to blame disinformation on disinformation researchers.



Further, false claims that stated that the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) were “spreading fake WhatsApp messages” were also shared by Irish far-right channels on Telegram, along with conspiracy theories alleging that ISD is “funded by MI5” and that this report’s authors were hired to apply the “RIC Model of policing and intelligence, where you hire locals so you don’t appear as threatening” — a reference to the Royal Irish Constabulary, the main

police force in Ireland when it was still a colony of the British Empire. None of these claims hold any truth.

Attacks and smear campaigns, based on unsupported, illusory claims against the media and extremism researchers are a common tactic used by far-right groups, politicians and supporters across the world. Such activity observed among Irish far-right Telegram channels as seen here is no different and, as noted again in a further case study in this report, it is also a common approach taken by these communities.

Case Study 2

The Balbriggan House Fire, 9 August 2020

Background

On 9 August 2020, a house caught fire in a residential estate in Balbriggan, Co. Dublin, resulting in a massive blaze. In the immediate aftermath of the fire, false claims circulated on social media claiming that the house belonged to an “African drug dealer” and that “African gangs” had started the fire. In reality, the fire was caused by an electrical fault that caused an oil tank to explode in the rear of the property, as reported by TheJournal.ie.²⁶ The family who lived in the house were forced to go into hiding for a week as a result of the false claims circulating about them.

Summary

- Balbriggan had been the frequent target of the Irish far-right before the fire and Telegram channels were quick to spread claims that the fire was caused by “African drug gangs”.
- The false drug dealer and “African gangs” claims were amplified by right-wing and hyper-partisan media.
- Channels attempted to frame a hate incident that happened a week later as a “fake hate crime” orchestrated to “gaslight” people about Balbriggan.

Top stats

- ISD recorded 1,138 messages from 21 channels in the week following the house fire in Balbriggan, north Dublin in August 2020, with 862 of these consisting of text-based messages.
- Of these text-based messages, 5.7% mentioned Balbriggan specifically. These were sent by 10 channels, six of which were categorised as ethnonationalist/anti-immigrant channels, three which share far-right conspiracy theories and one operated by a far-right influencer.

Well-established racist tropes set the scene for a disinformation campaign

The town of Balbriggan, north Dublin, had been a target of the Irish far-right on numerous occasions well before the house fire in August 2020. Across all the Telegram channels analysed in this report in messages gathered from 2019, Balbriggan was mentioned over 200 times. The first mention occurred in November 2019 when former journalist Gemma O'Doherty visited the area and described it as a place "rampant" with crime. O'Doherty has previously spread conspiracy theory content online and, for 20 minutes, she streamed a live video broadcast from the town, highlighting shops and restaurants selling halal, Asian or African food, and referring to the influx of migrants to the town as an "invasion".

Online far-right channels have frequently highlighted antisocial behaviour in the area, regularly sharing videos of Black teenagers in support of their claims that "African gangs" are responsible for this behaviour and using the term "Blackbriggan" to describe the town. The use of the term "gangs" to describe groups of Black youths is a well-established racist trope that works to synonymise Blackness with criminality.²⁷

The first Telegram message promoting the false claim that the house damaged in a fire in Balbriggan in August 2020 had belonged to an "African drug dealer" came from an ethnonationalist/anti-immigrant Telegram channel that simultaneously linked to a video of the blaze posted on the video platform BitChute. The post accompanying the video was taken from the text of a Dublin Live article about the fire, with the addition of a headline falsely claiming "African drug-dealer's home" goes up in flames in Balbriggan.²⁸

Compared to more popular video platforms like YouTube that have stricter rules around misleading or falsely-labelled content, lesser-known platforms like BitChute have few content moderation guidelines or terms of service. Scant enforcement of minimal rules makes such platforms havens for extremist, misleading or conspiratorial content that is designed to mislead, misinform or promote

hatred. It's likely the video was posted on BitChute to minimise the possibility that the footage, along with its false and racist title, would be removed by the hosting platform.

In the days following the fire, despite a lack of evidence, ethnonationalist/anti-immigrant Telegram channels continued to push the claim that "gangs" were behind the incident and attempted to link the fire to a supposed disturbance involving Black youths at a local shopping centre earlier that day. These channels also shared videos of a car on fire in the area to push the "African gangs" narrative. In reality, according to the Irish Independent, the car belonged to a man convicted for the possession of child pornography and the car was set on fire by local vigilantes.²⁹

Fig 6 Disinformation referring to the house as belonging to an "African drug-dealer".

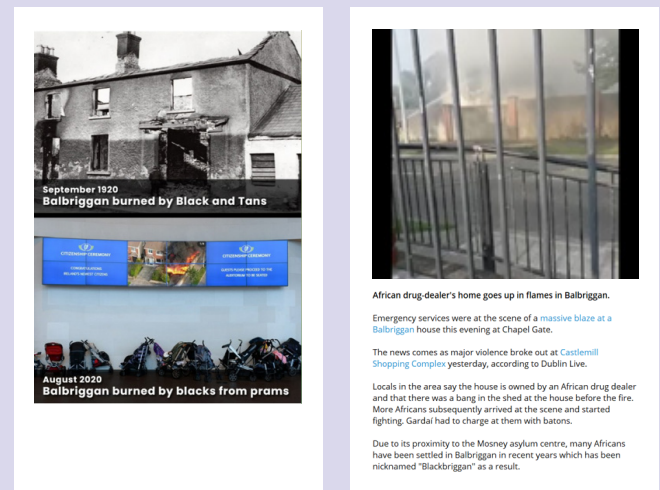
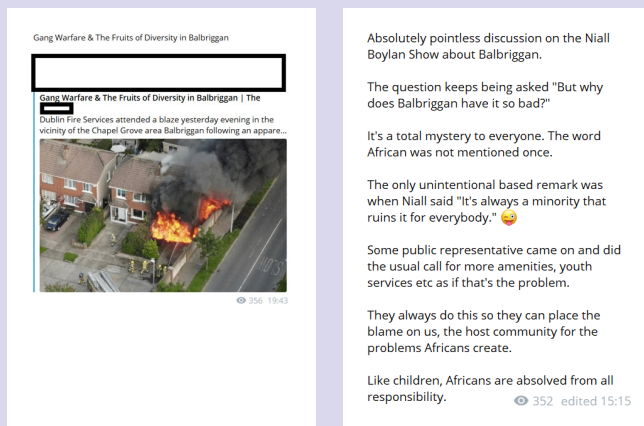


Fig 7 Far-right media reports and discussion about the media reaction to the fire.



Gangs narrative amplified by media sites

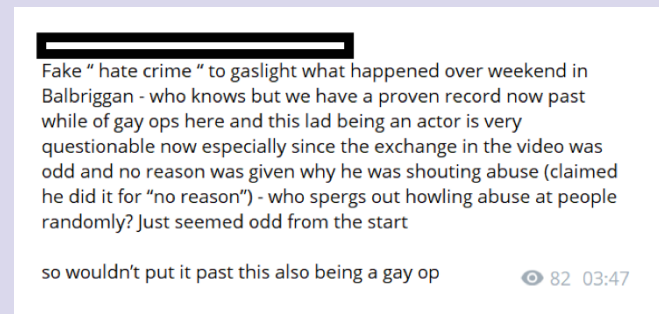
The “gangs” narrative was boosted on Telegram by the sharing of articles from right-leaning publication Gript and student publication, The Burkean, which both published articles referring to “gangs” in the area. The Burkean, whose article has since been removed from the site, also falsely claimed that the so-called gangs were somehow involved in the fire.³⁰

Irish ethnonationalist/anti-immigrant Telegram channels also explicitly rejected media coverage they believed did not support their racist narrative. This was seen in a slew of comments posted about a segment on a radio show by Niall Boylan, whose content is often shared among far-right communities in Ireland. The radio segment was described as “pointless” in one Telegram channel because the word “African” wasn’t mentioned. In the same post, the channel claimed that “the host community” [white Irish people] was being blamed for “problems Africans create”, further stirring up hatred and racial tensions towards the local Black community.

Layering lies on top of lies

On 14 August, an Irish woman of colour was the subject of racially-motivated verbal abuse in Galway in an incident caught on video and circulated widely online.³¹ This incident was framed among Irish far-right Telegram channels as a “fake hate crime” that was set up to “gaslight what happened over [the] weekend in Balbriggan”.

Fig 8 Attempts to sow the idea that the incident was a ‘fake hate crime’.



This highlights how Irish far-right Telegram communities have adopted tactics usually seen within US and international far-right groups, where blame and attribution of violence or crime that reflects badly on them are instead blamed on an insider or left-wing agent provocateur. Similar claims were made by far-right groups who blamed “Antifa” or other left-wing groups for violence in Washington DC following the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021.³²

Case Study 3

Homophobic Campaign Against Roderic O’Gorman, July 2020

Background

Roderic O’Gorman, a Teachta Dála (TD – a member of the Irish parliament) with the Green Party, was appointed as the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on 27 June 2020. Over the following two weeks, Irish far-right Telegram channels engaged in a homophobic disinformation campaign against O’Gorman, a gay man, claiming his sexuality made him unfit for the office and that he was a “paedophile apologist”. During this period, 10% of all Telegram messages posted by Irish far-right channels referenced O’Gorman and the allegations about him.

Summary

- Telegram acted as a megaphone for attacks against O’Gorman, providing a space for channels to post homophobic content and amplify conspiracy theories against him.
- Telegram channels were central to boosting content that misleadingly claimed that O’Gorman was a “paedophile apologist” and supported the views of Peter Tatchell.
- One ethnonationalist Telegram channel encouraged followers to impersonate Green Party voters and spread dissent about O’Gorman to members of the party.
- The smear campaign levelled against O’Gorman acted as an entry point for far-right supporters to carry out a wider campaign directed against LGBTQ+ groups in Ireland.

Top stats

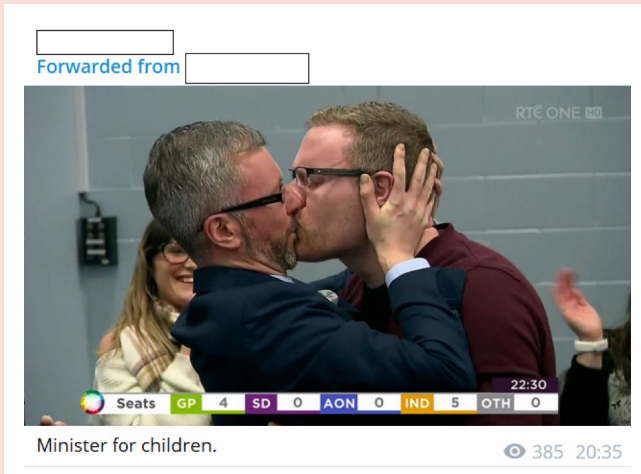
- ISD recorded 1,706 posts across 20 Telegram channels between 27 June - 12 July, coinciding with the appointment of Green Party TD Roderic O’Gorman as the Minister for Children and covering the first 15 days of his term.
- At least 181 posts, or 10.6% of the posts throughout these dates, related to O’Gorman and the smear campaign launched against him among Irish far-right entities.
- Of the 20 channels active during this period, 12 were categorised as ethnonationalist/ anti-immigrant channels, six were categorised as far-right conspiracy channels, one as a channel operated by a far-right political group and one as a channel for doxxing left-wing protesters or supporters.

A megaphone for O’Gorman slurs

Telegram acted as a megaphone for attacks against O’Gorman, providing a space for channels to promote homophobic content to their audiences and to amplify conspiracy theories against him that were first posted on a small political discussion forum.

On 27 June 2020, the same day O’Gorman was appointed to the cabinet of the new government coalition, a far-right Telegram channel posted a screenshot image of RTÉ News television coverage showing O’Gorman celebrating his election as a TD by kissing his partner, Ray Healy. The channel added the caption “minister for children” to the post, sowing the seeds for the beginning of the campaign of homophobia against O’Gorman.

Fig 9 Screenshot showing Telegram post referencing Roderic O’Gorman, published 27 June 2020.



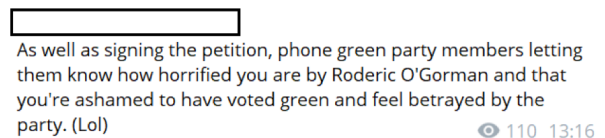
The image spread across social media. The Times Ireland reported that Fathers Rights Ireland, an organisation that represents single fathers, posted an image of O’Gorman and his partner on Facebook on 28 June that “prompted a series of homophobic comments that questioned O’Gorman’s ability to serve as minister”.³³ The image and caption used were the same as those posted on Telegram a day earlier. The Facebook comments were also liked by Fathers Rights Ireland who later apologised for the homophobic remarks.

Telegram was a central forum through which far-right actors boosted content that claimed O’Gorman supported the views of Peter Tatchell, a veteran LGBTQ+ activist who has been criticised for comments he made in the past regarding sex between adults and children, which he has repeatedly clarified.³⁴ Online posts highlighting links between O’Gorman and Tatchell were first posted on a fringe political forum on 30 June 2020. Within one hour, the forum post was shared on a highly influential far-right Irish Telegram channel and by the evening, the content was spreading across Twitter, including in tweets by Irish Freedom Party leader Hermann Kelly. They were later shared by the right-wing Renua party who also called on O’Gorman to resign.

Orchestrated calls for O’Gorman to resign

Photos of O’Gorman and Tatchell at Dublin’s 2018 Pride festival were shared in support of the claim that the TD supported Tatchell’s views. There is no record of O’Gorman voicing his support for any views espoused by Tatchell. In a statement about the “far-right” smear campaign against him, O’Gorman said: “I was surprised to read some [of] the quotes from the 90s, which I had not read before. Any of these views would be completely abhorrent to me”.³⁵ Tatchell also addressed the comments in various tweets in July and said he opposes sexual relationships between adults and young people.³⁶

Fig 10 Screenshot showing Telegram post encouraging users to impersonate Green Party voters.



Three different petitions calling for O’Gorman to resign over his links to Tatchell were shared 18 times cumulatively across Irish Telegram channels during this period. One ethnonationalist channel encouraged followers to sign the petition and then advised them to impersonate Green Party voters and

spread dissent about O’Gorman to members of the party, as seen in Fig 10.

Irish far-right Telegram channels were also quick to amplify remarks about O’Gorman’s connection to Tatchell made by actor John Connors who called it the “political scandal of the year” and falsely claimed O’Gorman invited Tatchell to participate in Pride in Dublin in 2018, according to The Irish Times.³⁷ Connors also claimed that O’Gorman was “playing the victim card and claiming homophobia” and that people were being branded as far-right for “being anti-paedophilia”, according to The Irish Times. Connors later apologised to O’Gorman for his remarks.³⁸

Wider homophobia against other LGBTQ+ politicians

The smear campaign levelled against O’Gorman through accusations linking him to Tatchell’s views acted as an entry point for far-right Telegram channels to then carry out a wider campaign pushing baseless claims that framed LGBTQ+ activists as supportive of Tatchell and paedophilia.

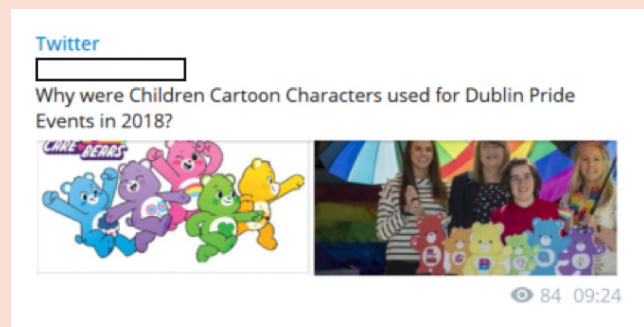
A video of Tatchell speaking at an event during Pride in 2018 was shared by one far-right channel to support the claim that Sinn Féin Senator Fintan Warfield, LGBTQ+ rights campaigner Justin McAleese, Fine Gael Senator Martin Conway and trans rights activist Sara Phillips all supported the British LGBTQ+ activist too. The same channel also shared a tweet that asked “why were children cartoon characters used for Dublin Pride events in 2018” to support their claims that there is a link between LGBTQ+ promotion and paedophilia.

The continued promotion of this link culminated on 11 July 2020, when numerous anti-paedophile rallies were held in Dublin.

11 July protests

On 5 July 2020, Hermann Kelly announced a “Hands Off Our Kids” rally for 11 July in Dublin, while supporters of the National Party promoted a “March for Innocence” to be held on the same day.

Fig 11 Screenshot showing Telegram post spreading anti-LGBTQ+ conspiracies.



One promotional poster shared on Telegram stated that the protests were to “demand the immediate removal from government of those complicit in child abuse, coverups and paedophilia activism”.

Social media channels, including Telegram, were used to share content from the events of 11 July, including photos of National Party members holding a placard featuring a slogan saying “protest the innocent, punish the guilty”, next to an image of children and an image of a noose.

Campaigning in defence of children is a regular tactic seen within far-right and extremist communities. Recently, in the summer of 2020, supporters of the QAnon conspiracy theory started to hijack hashtags associated with the Save the Children movement, as reported in the New York Times, in a tactical move that was credited with bringing the conspiracy to a much wider audience.³⁹ QAnon itself has its roots in the earlier widely debunked child exploitation conspiracy theory, Pizzagate.

Since 2016, alt-right and far-right activists have routinely accused liberal, multicultural or left-wing politicians or groups of supporting or enabling paedophilia as a way of spreading disinformation and accusing opponents of what is arguably regarded by most societies as the worst crime imaginable. In launching and propagating a homophobic disinformation campaign against Roderic O’Gorman, Irish far-right channels on Telegram sought to do the same.

Case Study 4

Activity of Far-Right Groups at Anti-Mask Protest, 12 September 2020

Background

Anti-mask demonstrations were held across Dublin on Saturday 12 September 2020, and attended by several far-right activists, among the variety of groups present. ISD analysis shows that, between 9-16 September, Irish far-right and ethnonationalist channels on Telegram were used to encourage supporters to attend the anti-mask rallies in Dublin. These same channels then published and amplified disinformation that claimed an incident that occurred during the day's events was staged, targeted other counter-protesters with antisemitic slurs online, and attempted to dismiss media reports about the rallies.

Summary

- Anti-mask rallies in Dublin were heavily promoted by far-right channels on Telegram ahead of 12 September.
- Far-right Telegram channels were highly active in publishing disinformation about the day's rallies.
- Counter-protesters were subjected to antisemitic slurs on Telegram.
- Hostility towards the media, a hallmark of far-right movements across the world, was a central feature of activity among Irish Telegram channels surrounding these rallies.

Top stats

- ISD recorded 1,795 posts across 24 Telegram channels between 9-16 September, the week surrounding anti-mask demonstrations attended by far-right activists.
- Of these, 1,419, or 79%, were text-based messages, with the remainder image-based messages.
- Of the 24 channels active during this period, 15 were categorised as ethnonationalist/anti-immigrant channels, six were categorised as far-right conspiracy channels and three categorised as far-right influencers.

Far-right promotion of anti-mask rallies

The anti-mask rallies were heavily promoted by far-right channels on Telegram ahead of 12 September. The most-widely shared message among the channels during the analysed period was a post originally published on an anti-lockdown channel on 11 September, and then shared at least 10 times among ethnonationalist channels, which urged followers to attend the protests in Dublin the following day. The post urged people “to get out on the streets”.

A Twitter video from Tracey O’Mahony, a barrister who has campaigned against COVID-19 restrictions in Ireland, was among the most-shared links during this period. The video, which featured O’Mahony sharing details about the upcoming rallies on 12 September, was shared among far-right Telegram channels in advance of the weekend.

Tweets and online statements from figures linked to the National Party were also shared among Telegram channels, including one short message that simply said “Leinster House. Saturday 2pm”.

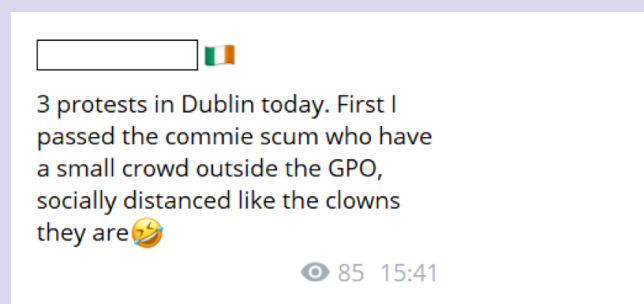
Claims of “false flag operation” shared among Telegram channels

During an anti-mask protest outside the Dáil (Irish parliament) on Kildare Street on 12 September, an incident occurred that resulted in far-right Telegram channels posting slurs and directing hatred and disinformation towards marginalised groups.

By the afternoon of 12 September, one ethnonationalist channel shared a video that showed protesters shouting “paedo scum” at a group of counter-protesters outside Leinster House. The video was then shared across other ethnonationalist and far-right channels and has been viewed a combined 3,820 times to date.

By evening, far-right Irish Telegram channels started to promote baseless claims and conspiracy theories alleging an incident that occurred on Kildare Street was staged and that it was a ‘false flag’ operation. One channel claimed counter-protesters staged an event to “smear the protesters”. Telegram was also used to share links from other platforms that featured disinformation. Two Telegram channels amplified tweets sharing images of the incident that claimed it was “staged”.

Fig 12 Screenshot showing Telegram post from channel discussing events on 12 September.



Other counter-protesters were subjected to harassment through these Telegram networks. Doctor Stephen Hatton was photographed protesting against the anti-mask march in Dublin, giving a thumbs down gesture while wearing a mask. A piece from the Irish Examiner, reporting on the photo, was shared on

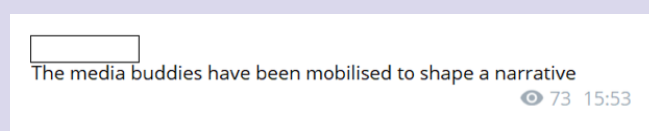
Telegram and used to target Hatton, firstly to claim he is not a doctor, and secondly by using an antisemitic slur to describe him.⁴⁰

Attacks on the media

Hostility towards the media and journalists, a characteristic evident in far-right movements across the world, was a central feature of activity in Irish Telegram channels surrounding this incident.

After multiple news organisations reported on the incident outside Leinster House, Irish far-right channels directed their hatred towards the media. One article from TheJournal.ie, which reported on the day's rallies, was featured in a message that was shared across three Telegram channels and used to support the claim that news organisations were "mobilised to shape a narrative".⁴¹ Earlier on 12 September, a subset of protesters had assembled outside the offices of TheJournal.ie to protest against its COVID-19 fact-checking reportage.

Fig 13 Screenshot showing Telegram post promoting anti-media message.



The anti-media narrative continued into 13 September, with one channel labelling reporting on the events the day before as "blatant lies". A report from Irish Independent journalist Ellen Coyne on the spread of COVID-19 conspiracies across Irish channels on Telegram, first published in June 2020, was also shared and used to direct misogynistic slurs towards the journalist.⁴²

Case Study 5

Investigating the Influence of Far-Right Activity among COVID-19 Telegram Channels

During the analysis of Irish far-right Telegram channels, ISD researchers noted that content from these channels was being shared among Telegram channels focused on the promotion of COVID-19 disinformation and conspiracy theories and arguments against the lockdown in Ireland. Irish far-right groups were heavily involved in organising anti-lockdown and anti-mask protests throughout 2020. To understand the extent to which far-right Telegram channels and wider off-platform far-right content from Irish and non-Irish entities is shared among these COVID-19 Telegram channels, ISD conducted a separate analysis of this network.

Using a similar methodology as described above, after identifying seed channels related to COVID-19 conspiracies and anti-lockdown activity, we employed a “snowball” methodology to identify related channels, and in total, identified nine channels that were regularly hosted and posted COVID-19 conspiracies and misinformation. Between April 2020, when the first of these channels was launched, and 3 February, 2021, these nine channels posted 4,584 messages.

In total, we found that 413 (9%) of all messages posted in Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels originated from a far-right source. 263 (5.7%) of these messages were forwarded from other far-right Telegram channels (both Irish and international channels) and 150 (3.3%) featured content produced by a non-Telegram far-right source. Separate to these figures, 13 messages, or 0.2%, shared by these Telegram channels featured content from a far-left source.

The 263 messages forwarded by Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels originated from 26 far-right Telegram channels, made up of both Irish far-right channels analysed in the main sections of this report and other Telegram channels linked to non-Irish, international far-right activists, highlighting the degree to which extremist and conspiratorial communities overlap within the Irish Telegram ecosystem. This represents a highly concerning intersection that could be exploited by extremist actors to fuel radicalisation, instigate targeted harassment campaigns against individuals, or encourage violence.

Using the open-source network and visualisation software Gephi, ISD researchers visualised and analysed the message-posting patterns of the nine Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels as they related to the forwarding of content from far-right Telegram channels or publishing of content from non-Telegram far-right sources.

The nodes are coloured by type: pink nodes represent Irish COVID-19 conspiracy and misinformation Telegram channels; green nodes represent Irish far-right Telegram channels; light blue nodes represent international far-right Telegram channels; dark blue nodes represent Irish far-right external non-Telegram sources and orange nodes represent international far-right non-Telegram sources.

The size of a pink node is based on how often it featured far-right content, forwarded from another Telegram channel or posted from a non-Telegram source.

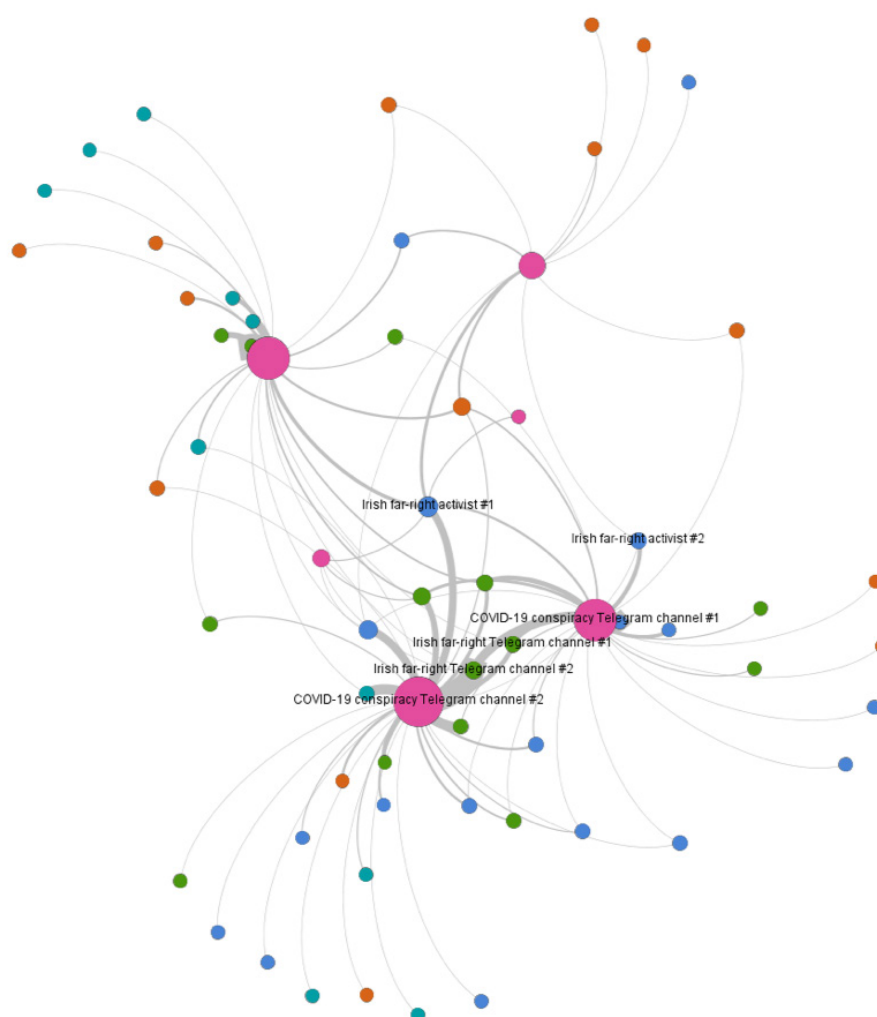
The centrality of the other non-pink nodes indicates how many channels these sources were featured within (how well they were connected to Irish COVID-19 conspiracy channels, represented by pink

nodes). The centrality of pink nodes represents how many sources it featured on its channel. If for example, a far-right source has a high number of connections to just one COVID-19 conspiracy channel, it is peripheral. If a far-right source was forwarded or posted in many COVID-19 conspiracy channels, it is more central.

The edges, or connections between nodes, are weighted, meaning the thickness of an edge is indicative of how many times content from far-right Telegram channels or non-Telegram far-right sources were forwarded or posted by Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels.

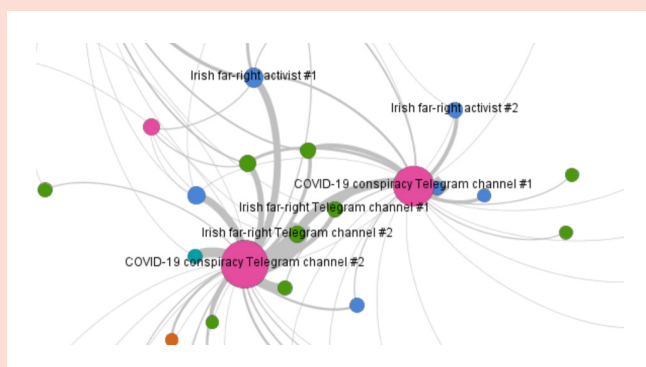
In the network map, it is clear that a selection of far-right sources are shared regularly among Irish

Fig 14 Network map showing Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels interactions with far-right content.



COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels. Six Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels are located near the centre of the map (pink nodes). Clustered near them are a selection of far-right Irish Telegram channels, meaning these sources are more frequently shared within this network of Irish conspiracy Telegram channels, compared to non-Telegram sources.

Fig 15 Close up of network map.



In figure 15, we see two far-right Telegram channels (green nodes) located in a cluster between two Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels (large pink nodes). These green nodes represent two Irish ethnonationalist channels included in our analysis. The centrality and frequency of links between these two ethnonationalist channels and Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels signify their cross-cutting influence.

Above them are two other green nodes, both belonging to other Irish ethnonationalist Telegram channels that are also located near the centre of the network map, meaning they are also influential within our entire Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram network. The centrality and high degree of connections for these two ethnonationalist channels are significant. Overall, the centrality and connectedness of all four of these ethnonationalist Irish Telegram channels demonstrates the extent to which far-right extremist content feeds Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels and influences their discussions.

At the top of figure 15, we see two non-Telegram far-right sources (dark blue nodes) that are located at the centre of the network. These dark blue nodes belong to two high-profile Irish far-right activists who have spread disinformation about the pandemic and fostered hatred against ethnic minorities in Ireland. The node labelled “Irish far-right activist #1” is, in fact, located at the very centre of the entire network and has significant connections to the four largest COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channels. The centrality of this node means that one individual, an Irish far-right activist, is influential across our entire Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram network.

The node labelled “Irish far-right activist #2” is located near the centre of the network too, but less so than #1, and #2 is mainly connected with one large Irish COVID-19 conspiracy Telegram channel.

In contrast, at the periphery of the network are a loose collection of light blue and orange nodes (seen in figure 14). These nodes belong to mainly non-Irish far-right Telegram channels and non-Telegram far-right sources, indicating their content is not as influential among Irish COVID-19 conspiracy channels compared to Irish far-right sources.

Conclusion

This research provides an analysis of how Irish far-right movements are using Telegram to organise, communicate and fuel disinformation campaigns throughout the wider online ecosystem. The anonymity of Telegram and the platform's negligent moderation policies highlight how relatively easy it is to orchestrate these campaigns, as well as the absence of consequences for those directly involved in that orchestration.

Analysis around anti-lockdown protests that took place in early 2021, which also resulted in violence and infiltration from far-right movements, was not included in this report.⁴³ It has been widely reported that Telegram has been central in the continued promotion of these rallies and further research should certainly be carried out in this area.^{44, 45}

This research comes at a time when Ireland is aiming to take a significant step towards enacting new criminal legislation to deal with hate crime and incitement to hatred. At the time of writing, in March 2021, Ireland does not have any specific legislation to deal with hate crime and though hate speech is an offence under the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989, there have been few prosecutions to date.⁴⁶ The Irish government is currently working on legislation that will introduce hate speech laws for protected ethnic, religious and minority groups.⁴⁷ The government also recently established the Future of Media Commission to examine the role of media, including online platforms, in the country.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Ireland's position as a key home of technology companies means that it plays a pivotal role in EU-wide discussions on how online information services, potentially including messaging platforms like Telegram, might be regulated in the coming years. Irish regulators will come to play a central part in designing what proportional but effective oversight looks like for companies that consistently host illegal content or content that is potentially harmful to public safety or fundamental rights. An understanding of the entire ecosystem of online services used to host, curate or amplify this content, including services like Telegram, will be critical in crafting comprehensive regulatory approaches.

This report highlights how Telegram offers Irish far-right communities a space to spread layers of lies. In considering and planning legislation, policies and programmes around hate speech, as well as Ireland's evolving digital policy landscape, it is important that both the government and independent bodies established by them are aware of the reality and risks that online platforms like Telegram carry. To tackle disinformation, conspiracies and extremism effectively, voices from the government, media, academia, NGOs, research and civil society organisations must all be consulted.

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