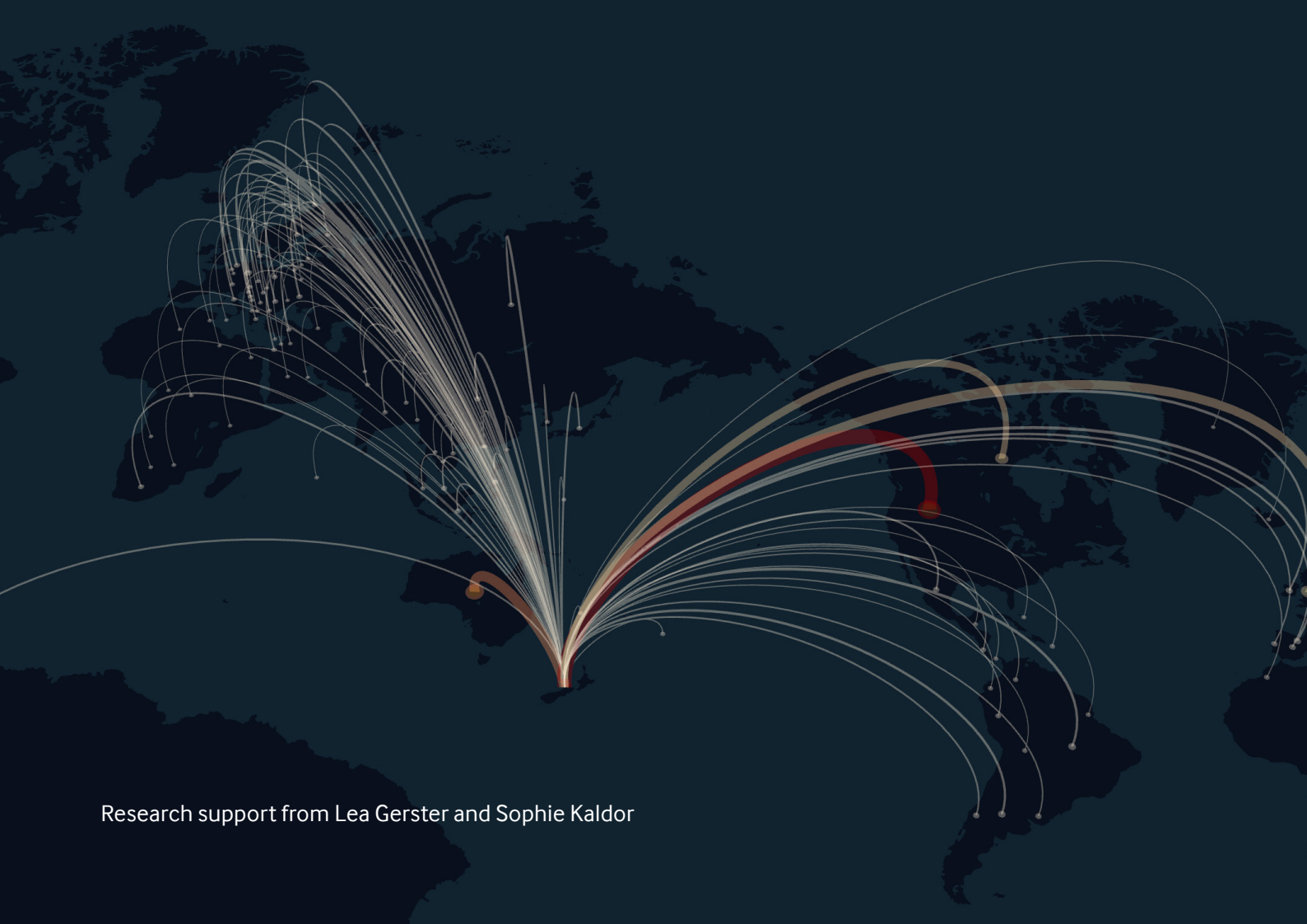


Understanding the New Zealand Online Extremist Ecosystem

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Research support from Lea Gerster and Sophie Kaldor

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Introduction

Two years ago on March 15th 2019 the Christchurch attack highlighted the profound impact of online extremism in New Zealand. The subsequent Royal Commission of Inquiry on the attack painted a clear picture of a terrorist embedded within an international online extremist ecosystem, inspired and instructed by YouTube videos, and using extreme right-wing discussion boards, including 4chan and 8chan (now 8kun).

New Zealand's 'Christchurch Call' initiative would go on to provide an international plan of action for curbing violent extremist use of the Internet – and help put far-right terrorism on the global agenda. But the Royal Commission set out the urgent need for an improved domestic picture of the challenge New Zealand faces from online extremism, how it has developed, as well as emerging trends.

In this paper, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue and CASM Technology provide a data-driven snapshot of the online activities of extremists with a demonstrable link to New Zealand, as well as the digital platforms connecting New Zealand to an international extremist ecosystem.

Exploring far-right, Islamist and far-left extremism as well as the growing grey area between conspiracy theories and extremism online, the research draws on data from social media sites including Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, a range of 'alt tech' platforms, including Parler, Gab and Telegram, alongside data from stand-alone extremist websites and forums, with over 600,000 posts collected from over 300 extremist accounts from New Zealand.

Our research sheds light on how extremism manifests online in New Zealand, the platforms where it spreads and key differences in how each are used. We look at the scale of mobilisation in both absolute terms – compared to mainstream social media use – and in contrast to extremism in other contexts around the world.

We analyse how the Internet allows New Zealand extremists to be influenced in ways that are profoundly international, whilst remaining rooted in domestic contexts. We also show how extremism online relates to phenomena such as hate speech, disinformation and conspiracy theories.

Focusing on data gathered from 2020, our research also looks at how offline events impact online extremist activity, from the captive audiences provided by Covid-19 lockdowns to increased polarisation around elections in New Zealand and the United States.

Analysing extremism across platforms and ideologies

Underpinning this data snapshot is a bespoke research architecture drawing together a range of technologies and research methods, including machine learning-based approaches to content analysis, embedded 'ethnographic' research within online extremist communities, as well as geolocating references to specific places. In an accompanying methodological paper, we discuss in greater detail the research approaches used to generate this snapshot of the state of the New Zealand online extremist ecosystem.

Overall, our research shows that New Zealand is not an exception to broader international extremism trends. A concentrated but engaged core of online activists in New Zealand are intimately plugged into international extremist subcultures which draw New Zealanders away from the protective factors around them – such as a long history of liberal values and strong institutions – and surround them with the polarising grievances raging on the other side of the world. To a lesser extent, international extremist subcultures are also plugged into New Zealand and discuss the people, places and issues of the country at some volume, especially the Christchurch attack itself.

In an average week across 2020 we found:

- 192 New Zealand extremist accounts were active online;
- The accounts posted 20,059 times in total. 199 posts were on Parler, 898 posts on Facebook, 2 messages on Telegram, 266 posts on Gab, 18,676 tweets on Twitter, and 18 videos on YouTube;
- The posts collectively attracted 203,807 likes and up-votes;
- The posts drew 62,077 comments and replies;
- Videos posted by extremist channels on YouTube were viewed 41,569 times;
- The posts were shared, reposted, retweeted, re-blogged, or otherwise amplified 38,333 times;
- 136 of these posts would be aggressive or a concrete call to action;
- Finally, 1,074 posts sent by extremists outside of New Zealand referenced New Zealand in some way.

In general, a community of this size is not hard to find, but easy to miss if no effort is taken. It represents a vivid social world that is all encompassing for its members, whilst remaining almost invisible to the wider public.

Key Findings: Scale

Extremists have an audience, and they provoke a reaction

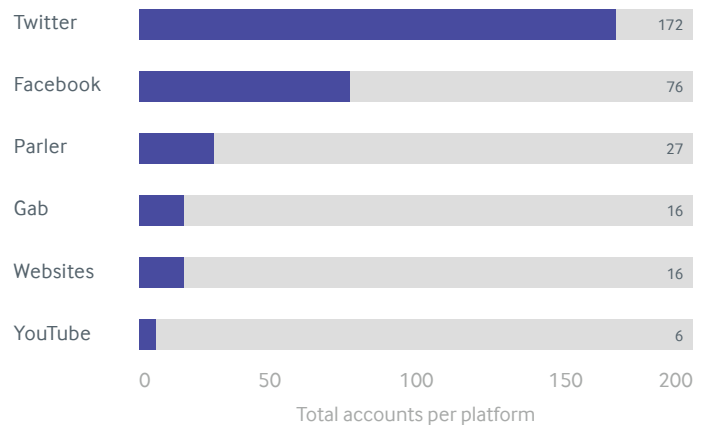
The online platforms used by extremists are busy, often noisy places, where even radical proselytising can go entirely unseen and unheeded. In general, however, that is not true in the case of New Zealand. Whether in praise or condemnation, New Zealand extremists' posts find an audience, and provoke a reaction.

Our ethnographic research and discovery found 315 extremist accounts, channels or pages that we judge to be from New Zealand, responsible for 608,335 posts. Over 2020 alone (until November 12th where our data collection was paused) New Zealand extremists' online presence has caused some kind of response or reaction from the public over 8 million times.

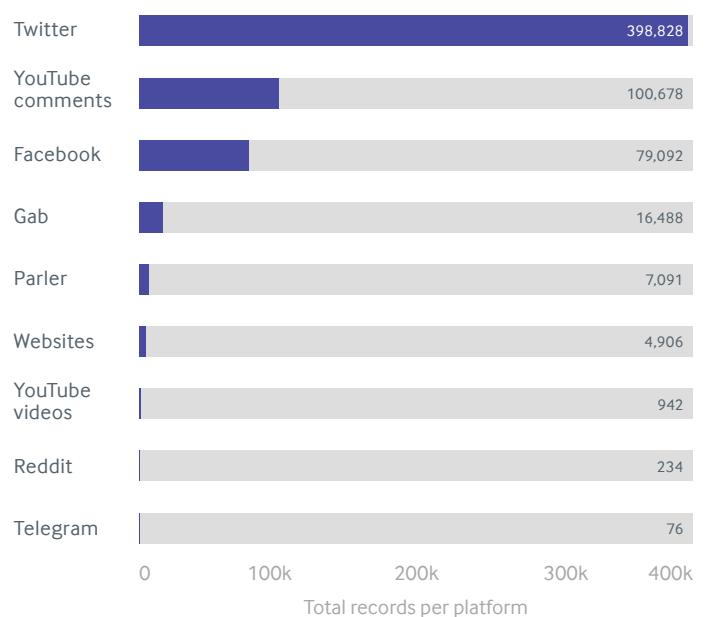
- 5,154,416 individual moments of engagement, whether likes, favourites or upvotes.
- 1,685,711 times when an extremist's post caused some kind of debate, discussion, comment or reply.
- Across relevant platforms, posts were re-shared 945,187 times and on YouTube extremist videos were viewed 1,324,974 times.

The accounts have a combined audience of 751,732 subscribers or followers around the world; people who have created a connection to see their activity. This averages to about 2,784 per account (although we are almost certainly counting some of the same people multiple times across accounts and platforms).

Total accounts per platform



Total records per platform



Where we can measure it, extremists are noisier, more visible and angrier online than the average New Zealand user

Extremist accounts likely have broader audiences than an average New Zealand Internet user. On Twitter for instance, the platform where this can most easily be measured, extremist accounts have an average of 1,514 followers, around 4 times that of a random sample of non-extremist New Zealand Twitter accounts, who have an average of 390. Extremists are also more vocal: producing over four times more Tweets over their lifetime than what we found to be the New Zealand average.

Of the 608,335 total posts from New Zealand extremists collected for this research, only 7,529 were classified by us as either aggressive or a call to action, about 1.24% of the total.¹ This is a small proportion of extremist behaviour, and tiny in comparison to the scale of social media use.

Proportionally, however, it is still over 7 times the rate of aggressive language used by ordinary New Zealand social media users, where only 0.17% of posts were classified as aggressive.

But set against the platforms they are on, and New Zealanders' use of them, the extremist presence is very small.

Counts and measures in the millions can sound very large, but these are platforms that host users representing a significant proportion of society, not just extremists. Set against the sheer size of social media use, extremism will only ever comprise a small amount.

- Extremist accounts make up a tiny proportion of New Zealand users of social media. On Twitter, for example, there are an estimated 730,000 New Zealand accounts, meaning the 172 extremist accounts in our sample make up 0.02% of total accounts in the country. Whilst this research does not comprehensively map all online extremism in New Zealand, it does point to the very small relative size of this community compared to the general New Zealand Internet population.
- They make up, of course, an even smaller amount of the total world-wide posts across a platform like Facebook or Twitter. While in New Zealand, over two thirds of the population are active social media users, New Zealanders make up only around a fifth of a percent of accounts on Twitter. The platform has 330 million monthly active users globally, producing 500 million messages a day, an average of 6,000 tweets per second. Facebook and YouTube provide even larger ecosystems with over 2.14 billion monthly active users and 2 billion logged-in monthly users, respectively.
- A small number of the noisiest extremist accounts create an outsized share of the content. The most prolific 10% of accounts are responsible for just under a third of all posts.

¹This includes aggressive or violent language use by extremists, as well as concrete calls to action against a perceived existential threat from an out-group, for example calls for New Zealanders to 'fight back', against 'traitors' in a coming 'civil war'.

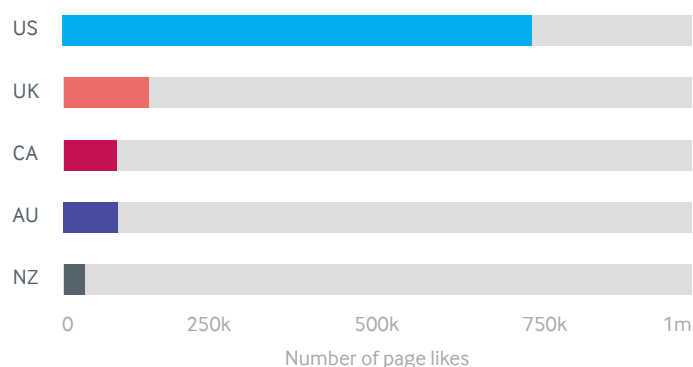
In absolute terms, New Zealand's extremists are also only a very small part of total extremist mobilisation online

Comparing online extremism across different countries is challenging for a range of reasons, ranging from language use and data availability to variations in platform usage between countries.

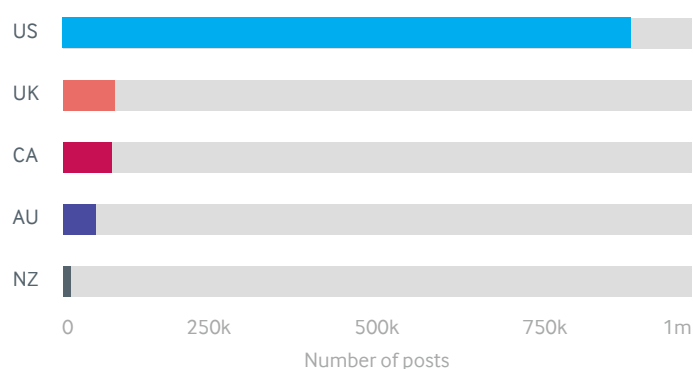
However, (and with some significant caveats in place) the different attempts to do this all suggest the same thing: extremist mobilisations online that are identifiably from New Zealand are small in absolute terms compared to those from a number of other countries around the world.

- On 4chan, for instance, one of the key online homes of the far-right, 0.4% of posters to the 'politically incorrect' /pol/ board do so under a New Zealand banner, 20th place. Over half of posters identify as Americans by comparison, and just over 8% as British.
- Subscriber numbers to far-right channels on YouTube are much lower for New Zealand than those in Canada and Germany, both in absolute and in relative terms. Our analysis shows that the average subscriber count of selected influential far-right accounts in Canada was over 1.9 million, 150k in Germany and 5.5k in New Zealand. Despite the fact that these figures are difficult to compare due to the international nature of YouTube, it is nevertheless noteworthy that, contrary to Canada, New Zealand generally lacks extremist influencers with major international visibility.
- Whilst around 600,000 posts sent by New Zealand extremists were analysed for this study, broadly comparable methods deployed in the US context have collected more than 23,000,000 posts over roughly the same timeframe.

Total page likes of far-right Facebook pages (December 2020)



Total 4Chan posts by country (December 2020)



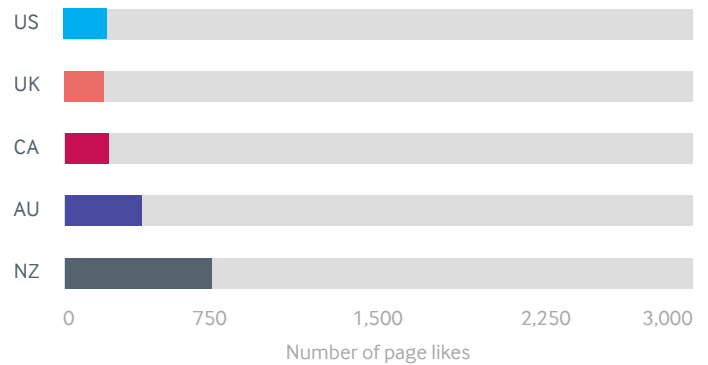
However, on a per capita basis.

New Zealand fits an international pattern

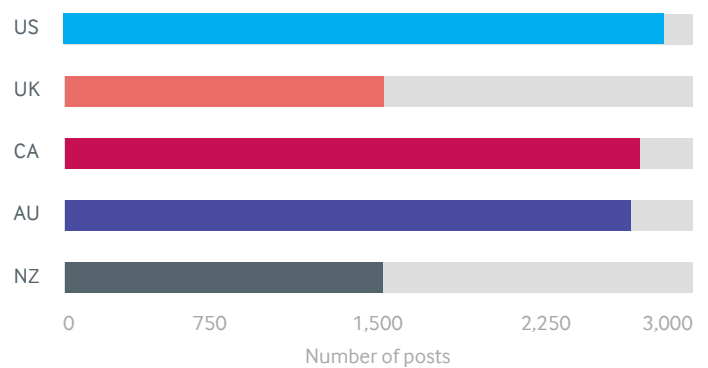
Whilst the size of New Zealand extremist activity is small in absolute terms, when related to the size of New Zealand's population, the phenomenon appears to be broadly consistent with what has recently been seen in the US, UK, Canada and Australia. Again, however, these comparisons do not claim to be exhaustive or systematic in nature.

- On a per-person basis, New Zealand extremists have posted almost twice as much as their counterparts in the UK and Australia. American extremists are (by far) the most prolific.
- Far-right Facebook pages in New Zealand have more followers per capita (757 per 100,000 Internet users) than Australia (399), Canada (252), the US (233) and the UK (220).
- On alternative platforms such as Telegram, Discord and Iron March, numbers for New Zealand extremists are very small and quite hard to compare. But on Gab and 4chan they appear comparable to those from other countries when set against population size.
- New Zealanders made 1,509 4chan posts per 100,000 Internet users, not far behind the UK (1,511), Australia (2,692), Canada (2,728) and the US (2,810).
- While the online ethnonationalist community online in New Zealand is very small in comparison to their international equivalents, New Zealanders sent the second-most QAnon-related tweets per capita (1,500 Tweets per 100,000 Internet users), only surpassed by the US (3,000) during the period analysed.

Total page likes of far-right Facebook pages per 100,000 internet users (December 2020)



Total 4Chan posts by country per 100,000 internet users (December 2020)



Key Findings: Nature

There is no central platform where New Zealand's extremists concentrate

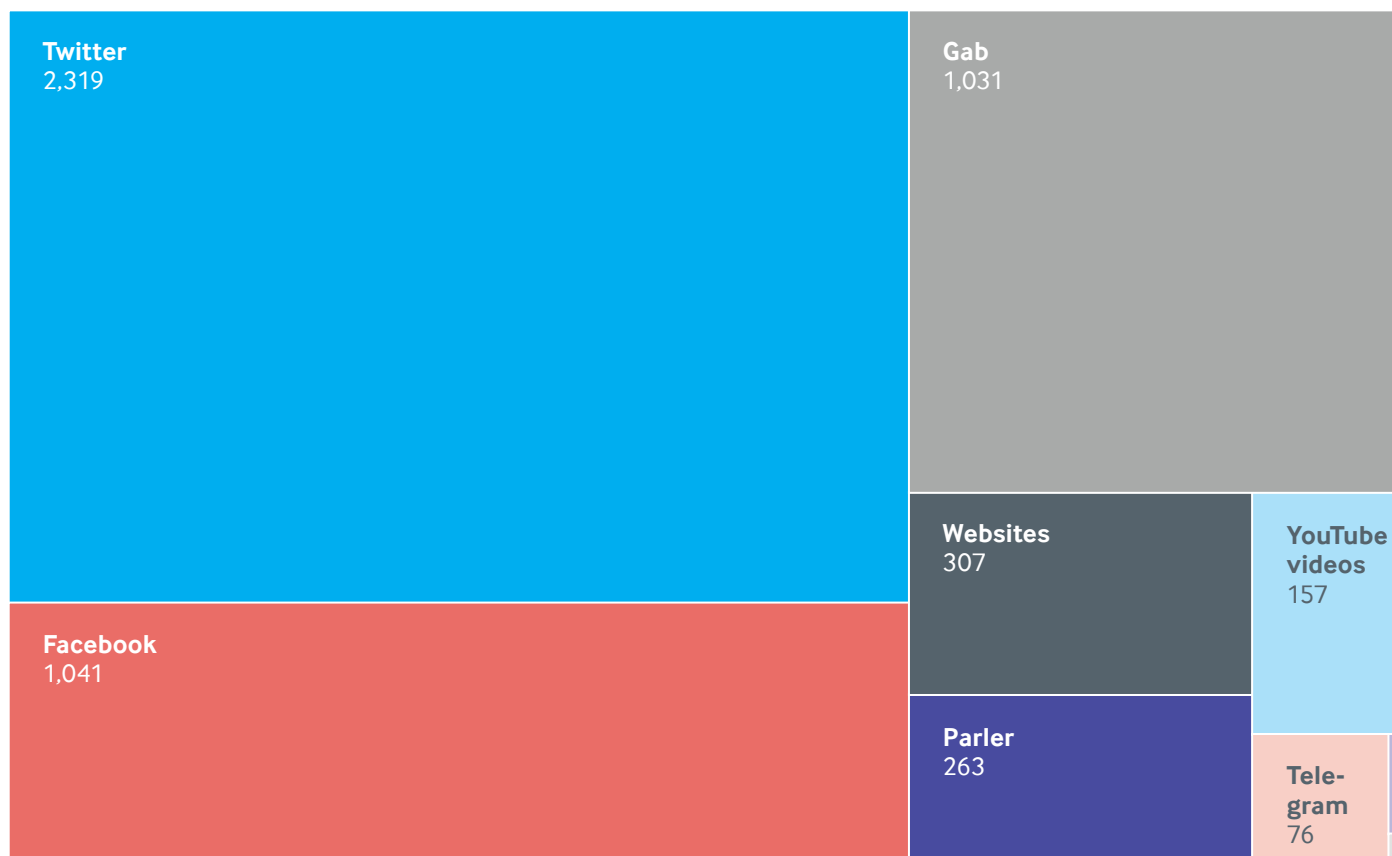
Extremist activity is scattered across a lot of different platforms. We found extremists active across ten platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, Reddit, YouTube, 4Chan, Gab, Parler, Discord, Bitchute, as well as a number of standalone websites. This likely represents only a partial picture of New Zealand online extremist mobilisation.

Platform moderation and content policies have become a central part of the global 'culture wars' cited by extremists, and this continues to raise the question of whether we are seeing a migration of extremists underway, as they move from mainstream social media platforms to a world of more sympathetic 'alt-tech' equivalents. Notably, this report predates the January 2021 US Capitol attacks, which saw large scale deplatforming of extremist actors from mainstream platforms.

New Zealand's extremists do not seem to have been either pushed off mainstream spaces, or left voluntarily. In fact, it was Twitter where we found most extremist accounts being created over 2020, and also the platform where we collected most posts (due in part to the ease of collecting data). Facebook was the platform where they had the largest audience and - by far - the greatest scale of engagement. Extremist accounts post more messages on Twitter and Gab than any other platform, but their posts receive, by far, more amplification and reposting on Facebook.

Mainstream platforms still host the majority of extremist activity, and are still the only way for extremists to reach significant numbers of people with whatever message they have. However, New Zealand extremists have also established a presence, albeit a smaller one, outside of this mainstream: most significantly on ultra-libertarian social media platforms like Parler and Gab, encrypted messaging channels such as Telegram, as well as standalone extremist websites.

Average number of records per user, per platform



*YouTube comments 6 **Reddit 2

Diverse manifestations of extremism

An ethnographic discovery phase for this research identified four strands of extremism as the most prominent: far-right, far-left, Islamist extremist, as well as harmful forms of conspiracy theories. Whilst not immediately evident as cohesive online communities in New Zealand, the prevalence of other extremism-adjacent phenomena such as the Incel movement require further study.

Far-right extremists constituted a constellation of groups presenting themselves as protecting New Zealand's cultural, racial and religious identity from perceived existential threats, ranging from anti-Muslim groups to ethnonationalists and white supremacists. Harmful conspiracy theories such as QAnon present events as the deliberate product of a powerful elite, acting as a catalyst for extremist mobilisation, and often targeting vulnerable communities.

Left-wing extremists were characterised by an opposition to liberal democracy, conspiracy theories around shadowy elites controlling populations, calls for non-democratic struggles against capitalism, and sympathies for authoritarian regimes.

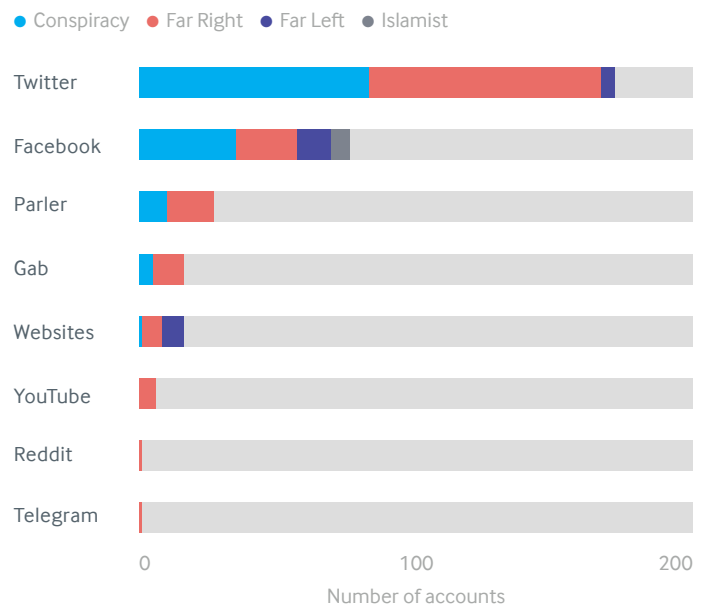
Islamist extremists meanwhile were dedicated to using violence or activism to systematically transform society and in the long term create an exclusionary and totalitarian Islamic state.

These forms of extremism are distinguished from more mainstream analogues by the supremacist elevation of an 'in-group' above all others. A full definition of extremism is outlined in the annex.

The far-right are by far the most numerous and active group online. Over half (356,170) of our 608,335 posts and just under half of the accounts (170) identified came from them. Conspiracy theorists accounted for another 226,870 posts (from 134 accounts), and had significant overlap in audience and followers with the far-right, at least on the platforms where this was able to be analysed.

The far-left was much smaller; they sent (at 22,865 posts and 25 accounts or websites) less than a tenth of the volume of posts of either conspiracists or the far-right. They were more politicised than any other group however, most likely to be active on standalone forums and to use action-oriented or aggressive language. We barely found a presence of Islamist extremists online: they were the least likely to engage in political discussion, were almost exclusively on Facebook and by far the smallest, both in terms of posts (2,430) and pages (7).

Account counts per association, per platform



Case study: QAnon

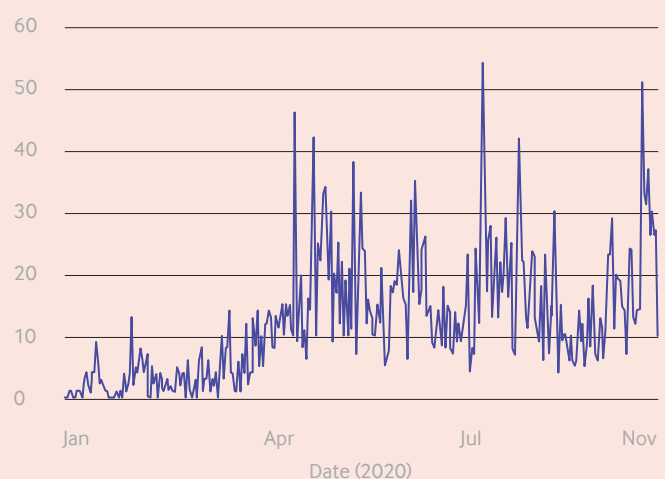
The rise of the QAnon conspiracy theory, which depicts Donald Trump as waging a secret war against an elite cabal of satanic paedophiles, was a major global trend throughout 2020. Globally, ISD researchers recorded a doubling of users across the world engaging in discussion of QAnon across Facebook and Twitter in March 2020, with membership of QAnon groups on Facebook increasing by 120% during this month, with much of this online community geared towards conspiratorial discussion and mobilisation around Covid-19. But despite QAnon's focus on American politics, the conspiracy theory has also gained traction in New Zealand, including incorporating local politics and domestic causes, as well as merging with other widespread conspiracy theories about Covid-19 and 5G towers.

Notably, QAnon activity in New Zealand is not confined to the Internet, with references to the conspiracy theory being regularly spotted at anti-lockdown rallies. Such rallies have attracted not only opponents of government lockdowns but also people calling for a ban of the 1080 poison and referencing QAnon-related conspiracy theories about child trafficking. Conspiracies around Covid-19 merging with discredited theories around 5G even resulted in criminal activities in New Zealand, including at least 14 arson attacks on 5G infrastructure in a span of six weeks.

This growing offline mobilisation is reflected in the behaviour of domestic New Zealand extremists, whereby we saw mentions of QAnon hashtags and terms rise throughout 2020. Three peaks are apparent, one between the months of May/June, one in August and a final one in November. The first two peaks appear to coincide with news around COVID infections in New Zealand, while the November peak coincides with the elections in the US. Unsurprisingly, posts from conspiracy accounts had the highest incidence of QAnon mentions, twice that of the overall average.

Parler was the platform with the highest number of mentions, being 8 times more likely to contain QAnon mentions than the average, with 6% of all analysed posts from this platform referencing QAnon. Notably, Facebook's ban on QAnon introduced in October 2020 does appear to have led to a drop-off in activity on the platform, although New Zealand-based support for the conspiracy is still evident.

Number of records discussing QAnon (2020)



There are significant differences in discussion across platforms and ideologies

Across these four different kinds of extremism, we identified six themes to be principally associated with extremist discussion: 'religion', 'race', 'politics', 'health', 'environment' and the 'economy'.

In a year with elections both in New Zealand and the US, politics was unsurprisingly the most prominent of these themes, and around a third of discussion on any of these topics fell across political topics, which ranged from geopolitics to bizarre conspiracies about a reptilian race controlling government, an idea that can be traced back to the British conspiracy theorist David Icke. And during 2020, where health has become politicised to perhaps an unprecedented degree, there was also little surprise to see health as the second most prominent theme. Extremists developed a new interest in public health, increasing markedly from March 2020 onwards, eventually accounting for a quarter of discussion on any of these topics across the year overall.

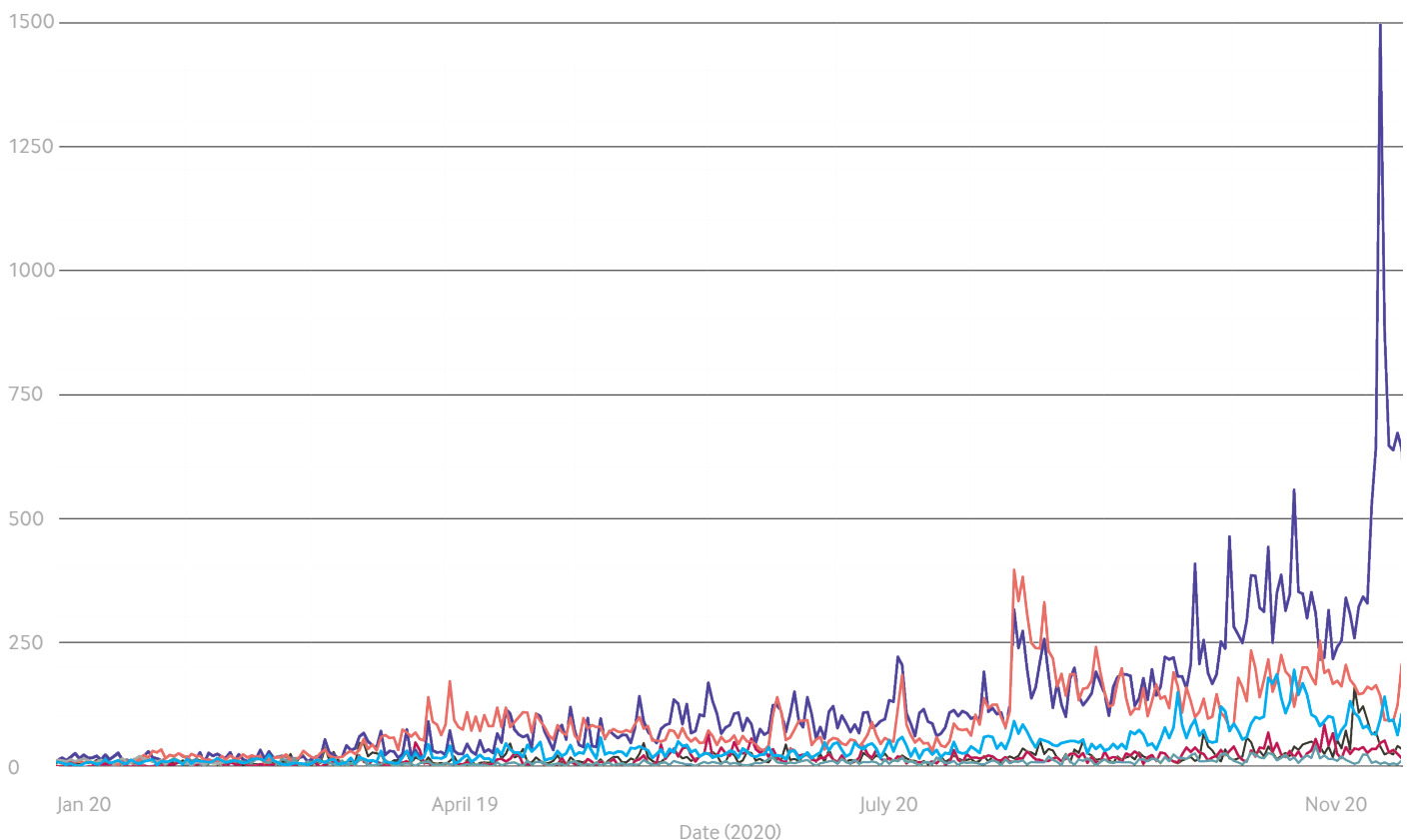
Notably, major spikes in extremist discussion accompanied national lockdowns in New Zealand, as well as elections in both New Zealand and the United States.

Most of the messages - almost 80% - did not fall into any of these six key themes, however. What this tells us is that extremists don't always talk about extreme topics, or things typically or classically associated with extremism. Extremists use the Internet to propagandise and agitate for violence and radical change, but they also use it for more mundane discussions, ranging from sport to culture.

We saw significant complexity in how these themes map onto both the platforms being used and the groups that are using them. Proportionally, Reddit hosts far more discussion around religion by extremists than any other platform for instance and Parler sees more political discussions, but very little in the way of economics. The largest share of the conversation about race is on standalone extremist websites, while considerable environmental discussion takes place on Facebook.

Number of records per theme over time

● Economy ● Environment ● Health ● Politics ● Race ● Religion



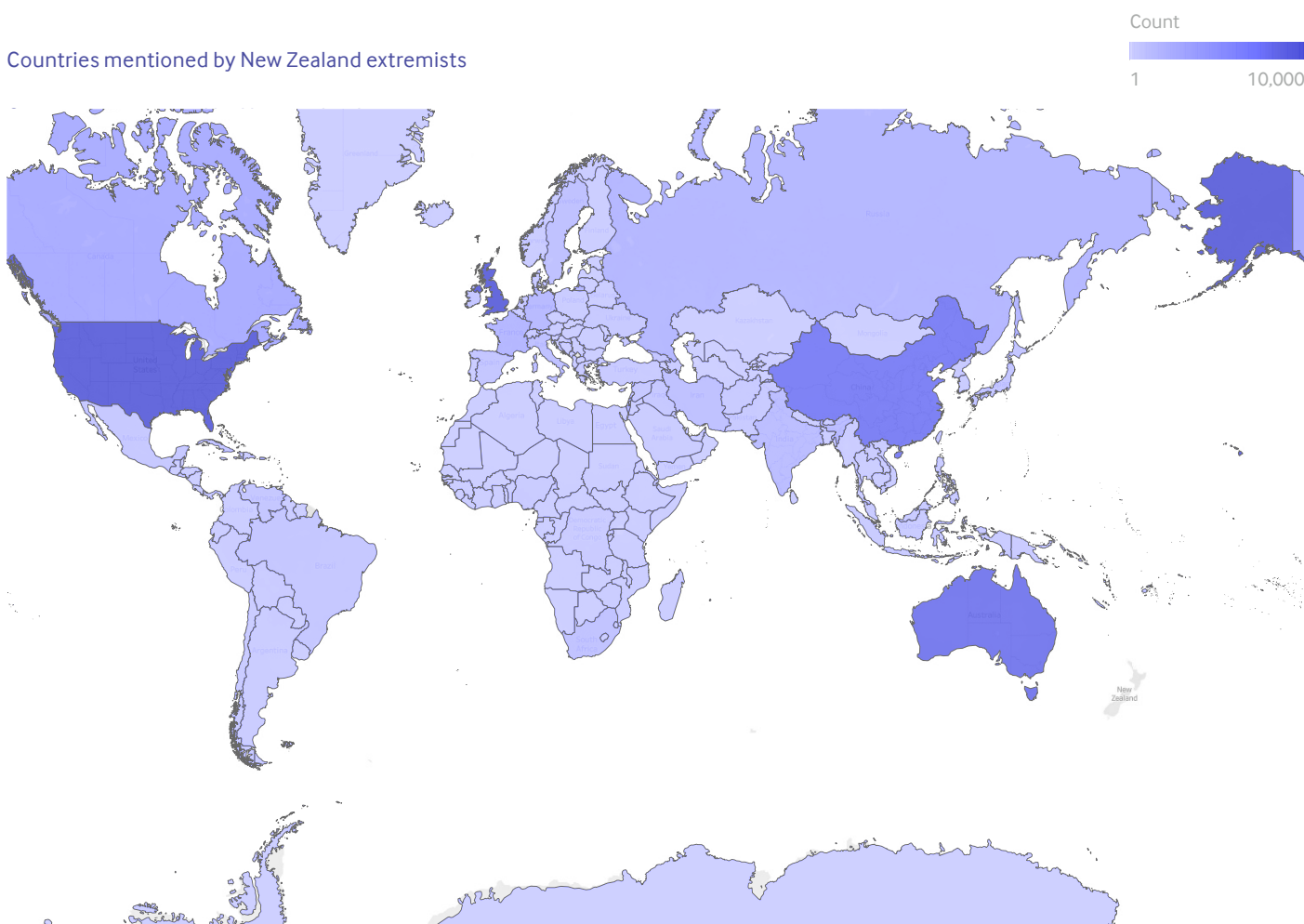
Key Findings: Scope

The Internet has caused international grievances and flash-points to be as prominent to extremists in New Zealand as domestic issues

The national character of New Zealand is often cited by policy makers and experts as a protective bulwark against extremism: a strong and free press, a tolerant and open society, a long history of liberal values and strong institutions enshrining and protecting them.

Whilst this is certainly true, there is a countervailing trend which is also important: the Internet can lift extremists out of New Zealand's own domestic political and social context, and make them angry, aggrieved and mobilised about things that are happening across the other side of the world.

The outlook of New Zealand extremists is highly international. A full sixth of all posts from New Zealand extremists explicitly mention something, someone or somewhere outside of the country, just under 95,000 in total (given the way this is detected, a significant proportion). New Zealand extremists mention places outside of New Zealand three times more frequently than places within the country itself. This international focus was broad: a place, thing or organisation from 224 different countries was mentioned at least once, with most focus concentrating on (in order of frequency) the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, China, Canada, France and Russia.



Map showing online mentions of international entities by New Zealand extremists. Line sized by volume of mentions (2009-2020)



New Zealand extremists are more interested in their international counterparts than vice versa

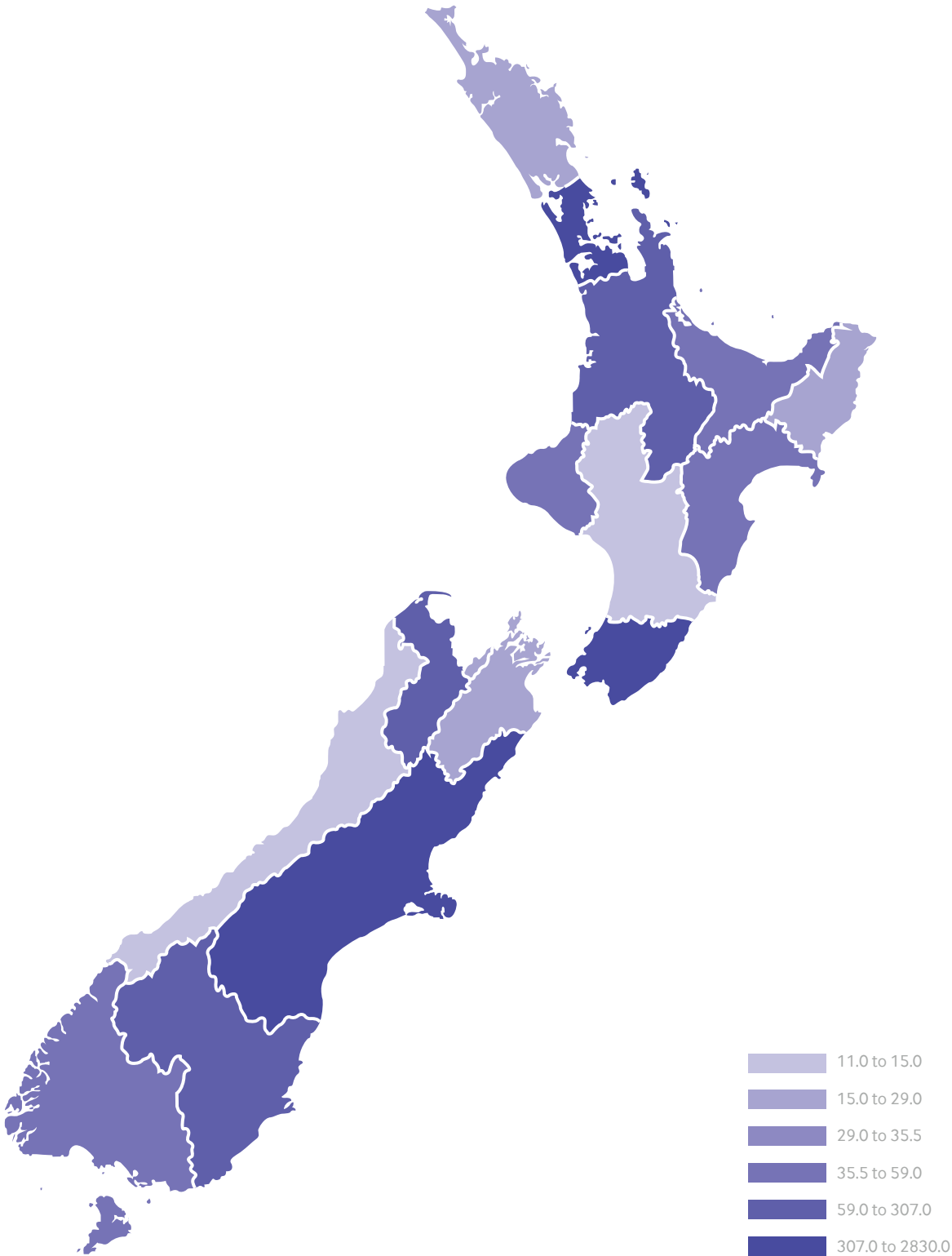
The data suggests more emphatic engagement from New Zealanders in the events, personalities and affairs of the international sphere than vice versa. Drawing on data on international extremist actors, and particularly other countries in the Anglosphere, we found that while extremists from 102 different countries mentioned New Zealand during our period of study, references to New Zealand were only present in a tiny fraction (0.05%) of the total number of posts analysed from international extremists.

However, the Christchurch attack remains a key point of discussion among international extremists

The Christchurch attack has been a symbolic issue for extremist movements around the world. It is by far the single most mentioned location in New Zealand by international extremists - over half of all mentions of any identifiable location in New Zealand are about Christchurch, and over the last two years (November 2018- November 2020), just under half of all mentions made by international extremists of a place, person or thing in New Zealand happened in the immediate aftermath of the attack itself, and the attacker's trial.

Indeed, Christchurch is far more significant for extremists around the world than among extremists in New Zealand, who mentioned Christchurch (and indeed any other place in Canterbury) in just 18% of any mention of an identifiable location within New Zealand.

Map showing number of mentions of New Zealand’s sixteen local government regions by international extremists (2016-2020).
Scale generated according to comparable proportions of mentions.



Methodological annex

Ethics

Given the potential sensitivity of the research, this project was governed by a robust ethical framework, rooted in the best practice of the emerging Internet research field.

Issues of privacy online are complex. In some cases, online spaces are clearly public - such as Twitter's timeline, or clearly private, such as direct messages on Facebook. In some cases, the privacy of some spaces is more ambiguous, as with open groups on Facebook or very large fora where membership is required.

Reflecting this, all research was conducted on the foundational principle of respect for the persons present in the online spaces studied, and for the privacy of these persons. To preserve privacy, all outputs from the project are presented at an aggregate level, with no row-level data, usernames or other identifying data related to individuals shared outside of CASM and ISD.

Furthermore, research took place on the basis of anonymity, whereby the anonymity of all research subjects must be guaranteed through research method (including the use of permanent de-identification where possible, the maintenance of a separate and secured coded name register where this is required by the research, and the limitation of access to identifiable data).

All efforts comply with UK data regulation and GDPR requirements, as well as New Zealand's Privacy Act (2020). In addition, research approaches were designed to ensure data sovereignty is maintained in accordance with the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi.

A full methodological overview can be found in an accompanying methods paper.

Defining Extremism

ISD has developed a definition to help guide its classification of extremism which is based on 'social identity': the active pursuit and advocacy of systemic political and societal change, to reflect an ideology that claims the supremacy of one 'in-group' over all 'out-groups' and propagates the dehumanisation of that out-group. This understanding of extremism forms the basis of this research.

Within the New Zealand context, any support for political and social change that would advocate for the dominance of one specific, ethnically or religiously defined in-group that would deny out-groups the right to equal rights, participation and belonging in New Zealand's society would fall under this project's definition of extremism. While this is not an exhaustive list, potential in-groups of extremist groups in New Zealand could be defined in terms of ethnicity, religion or an exclusionary interpretation of bicultural nationhood that dehumanises out-groups perceived as a "threat" to that status quo. Out-groupings might include Māori, Muslims, Jews, migrants, 'elites' and the rainbow community.

This definition simultaneously narrows and broadens the scope of potentially relevant actors. It avoids a narrow focus on solely political violence and terrorism, by considering the non-violent promotion of extremist ideologies through politics, media and culture. In its emphasis on the advocacy for the superiority of one identity-based 'in-group', it does however draw a line between radical - but not necessarily supremacist or authoritarian - critiques of the status quo extremists who seek systemic political and societal change to subjugate of all 'out-groups.'

Glossary

Rooted in over a decade of studying online extremism, ISD used the following definitions for its research, informed by a 'social identity' definition of extremism as 'the active pursuit and advocacy of systemic political and societal change to reflect an ideology that claims the supremacy of one 'in-group' overall 'outgroups' and propagates the dehumanisation of those out-groups.

Far-right extremism: Right-wing extremism is defined by the scholar Cas Mudde as an ideology that has at least three of the following five characteristics: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy or advocacy of a strong state. Far-right extremism is distinguished from a wider pool of far-right radicalism by extremists' rejection of democracy (including systems such as minority rights and independent institutions) as a form of government in principle and favour authoritarian systems of rule. In New Zealand, this constitutes a constellation of groups presenting themselves as protecting the country's cultural, racial and religious identity from perceived existential threats, ranging from anti-Muslim groups to ethnonationalists and white supremacists.

Far-left extremism: Left-wing extremists are political actors who, often influenced by communist and anarchist ideologies, reject the principles of social democracy in their pursuit of systematic change of the capitalist system. Left-wing extremism is characterised by opposition to liberal democracy, sympathies for authoritarian regimes and conspiracy theories directed against Western democracies. Left-wing extremists rely on extra-parliamentary struggle against capitalism and refuse to compromise with political actors who advocate maintaining the status quo.

Islamist extremism: Islamist extremism describes the advocacy of a system of belief that promotes the creation of an exclusionary and totalitarian Islamic state, within which those who do not subscribe to this vision are portrayed as an inferior 'out-group' and are subjected to implicit, explicit or violent means of subjugation and prejudice. Islamist extremists propagate a dehumanising 'othering' mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights. Extremist groups pursue and advocate a systemic political and societal change that reflects their worldview. They may do this through non-violent and more subtle means, as well as through violent or explicit means, including terrorism. Extremism can be advocated by state and non-state actors alike.

Conspiracy theories: A conspiracy theory is a belief that a group operating in secret is trying to control social or political processes out of self-interest, and with little regard for the common good. In this report, we focus on conspiracy theories with the potential for real-world harm, and the potential to create fertile ground for extremist ideologies.



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