

Gaming and Extremism

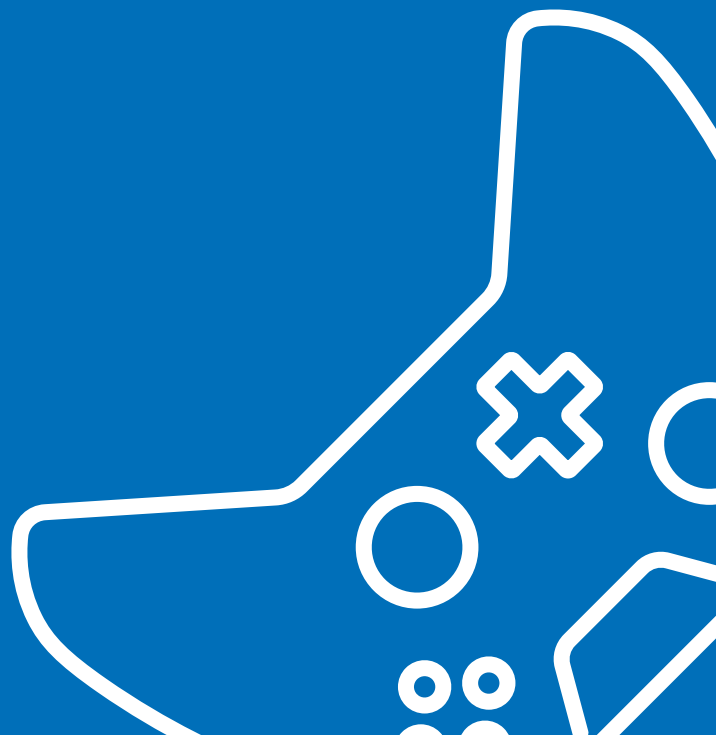
The Extreme Right on DLive

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About the series

This briefing is part of ISD's Gaming and Extremism Series exploring the role online gaming plays in the strategy of far-right extremists in the UK and globally. This is part of a broader programme on the 'Future of Extremism' being delivered by ISD in the second half of 2021, charting the transformational shifts in the extremist threat landscape two decades on from 9/11, and the policy strategies required to counter the next generation of extremist threats. This briefing provides a snapshot overview of the extreme right's use of the video streaming platform DLive.



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Executive summary

DLive is a livestreaming platform created in 2017 and acquired by BitTorrent in 2019. From late 2019 onward, the combination of lax content moderation and DLive's in-built opportunities for monetisation¹ using a blockchain-based cryptocurrency reportedly attracted² significant numbers of extreme right and fringe streamers to the platform. In early 2021, at least nine channels are alleged to have livestreamed the January 6th incursion into the US Capitol on the platform.³

DLive has a policy⁴ of tagging channels which contain political or adult content as 'X tag' channels. In the wake of the events at the Capitol, DLive took the step of demonetising⁵ all X tag channels. They also suspended⁶ the accounts of users who had streamed the Capitol incursion, announced a content moderation review of all X tag channels with significant viewership, and temporarily suspended all use of their platform for those in the Washington DC area ahead of the Presidential Inauguration.

This briefing details the results of ethnographic analysis of the role which DLive plays in UK extreme right-wing mobilisation online, with specific attention played to the overlap between extremist use of the platform and the targeting of gamers for radicalisation. In total we watched **13.5 hours of livestreamed content** and analysed the activity of **100 extreme right accounts**.

The time which ISD analysts spent scoping the platform overlapped with the removal of several high-profile extreme right wing users of the platform. Importantly this analysis helps document how extremists are using a multi-platform strategy to avoid the negative impacts that content moderation efforts can have on their communications strategies.

Key Findings

- **A relatively wide range of extremist influencers including British white nationalists use DLive as part of a broader strategy to broadcast extreme right ideology to their audiences.** The monetisation provided by DLive means that as well as providing a means to stream shows to audiences the platform offers the opportunity of netting them funds.
- **Extremists have an ambivalent relationship with DLive, treating it as part of a multi-platform strategy designed to circumnavigate content moderation.** We found that extremists used DLive opportunistically due to the relative freedom it afforded them to broadcast content which would not be allowed on other platforms. However, this was not out of any particular affection for the platform, with extremists often streaming across multiple platforms in a bid to avoid moderation efforts.
- **Efforts by DLive to implement more robust terms of service appear to be having an impact on extremist activity.** Several of the accounts we monitored were removed by DLive over the course of our analysis. Additionally, the users which we monitored often discussed using alternative platforms like Trovo and Odysee to broadcast, which they felt provided more permissive environments for extremist activity.
- **We found limited evidence to suggest that the livestreaming of gaming is used as a strategy by extremists to radicalise new users on DLive.** Out of the 100 extremist accounts analysed, only seven used DLive to stream gaming. Of these seven only three appeared to use gaming to advance extreme right ideology and movements. Analysing the gaming content produced by these users it appears that gaming primarily functions as a means for extreme right wing influencers to reach established audiences and strengthen existing extremist communities, rather than to radicalise and recruit new members.

Findings of Analysis

Extremist use of DLive

Using the methodology laid out at the end of this briefing, ISD analysts watched a total of 6.5 hours of content produced by extreme right wing users on the streaming platform, and an additional 7 hours of archived DLive content which was hosted on other platforms including Odysee and BitChute. This analysis prioritised monitoring of extreme right users either from the UK or targeting British audiences who were also streaming gaming footage on the platform.

In addition to this we conducted analysis based on the other material present on users' account pages where it existed, so as to glean an understanding of the broader use of the platform by the extreme right. This included assessments of extremists who were not engaged in gaming activity.

Through this analysis of content streamed on the platform and, where available, of information available on individual accounts it appears that the primary use of DLive seems to be to host talk shows of varying types. This applies strongly to the extreme right community active on the platform, but also appears to apply to DLive's user base overall. On observation, the categories of 'Podcast', 'Chatting' and 'News' appear to draw more viewers than the gaming categories on the platform.

These chat shows commonly promote white nationalist viewpoints or glorify 'white culture'. Based on our analysis this activity seems to be non-violent, and primarily designed to broadcast extreme right wing ideology to established extremist audiences.

In particular, it seems that DLive is used by various elements of the extreme right community to stream content which would likely be banned on other platforms. This includes racist, sexist, homophobic and conspiracy content. Streamers communicate to their audiences about news and current events, hold discussions with other extreme right figures, solicit donations, and promote merchandise. This is the same strategy which the extreme right has employed on multiple other streaming platforms, including YouTube and Twitch. Streaming shows serve multiple purposes, including building audiences, developing a sense of community with their followers, and monetisation, for example through asking for donations or answering paid questions.

Extreme right use of gaming livestreams

Out of the 100 extreme right accounts we analysed on the platform we only found seven which appeared to be used for streaming gaming or to engage with gaming-related activity. These seven included four individuals with small followings who seemed to use the platform occasionally for playing games for their personal enjoyment.

Three users we analysed use livestream gaming on the platform as part of an effort to promote extreme viewpoints to their audience.

One of these users used DLive, as well as YouTube, to stream Call of Duty tournaments which have been reported on in the media. After being banned from DLive, the user continued to stream his gaming tournaments on YouTube; however, as of April 24th 2021 his YouTube account has also been suspended. The user's swift shift from DLive to YouTube for hosting his gaming tournaments suggests there was no specific relationship between DLive as a platform and the tournaments themselves. It appears that future Warzone tournaments will be streamed using Odysee's new streaming service.

Two other users are streamers and commentators who use DLive to stream themselves playing various games together, in addition to hosting a regular talk-show which discusses news and events from a white nationalist perspective. During gaming streams, their discussion generally relates mostly to gameplay, with occasional casual comments reflecting their political or racial views. They operate across multiple platforms, including uploading content on Odysee and BitChute. One of these users has explicitly discussed the use of games to humanise white nationalists and promote 'white positivity'.

Through analysis of the content produced by these users, livestreaming of gaming appears to primarily function as a means for extreme right wing influencers to reach established audiences and strengthen existing extremist communities, rather than to radicalise and recruit new members. A case study below, outlining the use of Call of Duty tournaments expands on this in more detail.

Case study

Patriotic Alternative's Warzone tournaments

Over the course of the pandemic, the British white nationalist group Patriotic Alternative instituted several online activities which appear to be aimed at fostering a sense of community and connection amongst Patriotic Alternative's supporters. In addition to regular talk shows, this includes a book club and a film club.

The first tournament was held on 27th December and was successful enough that Patriotic Alternative instituted the tournaments as a regular event. By 2nd May 2021, Patriotic Alternative hosted a total of seven Warzone tournaments. The first five of these were streamed on DLive, alongside other platforms, as they often stream shows simultaneously on multiple platforms as part of a broader strategy of avoiding bans.

Media coverage of the tournaments in February 2021⁷ appears to have boosted their popularity. For example, on March 22nd a user, who participates in the tournaments, streamed a show on DLive in which he commented that "I was actually thinking about not doing the Warzone livestreams anymore, because I was having connection issues and all this other stuff, and then I read [the media coverage] and I was like, well, nope, I'm sold, I'm totally doing this from now on." The fact that media coverage of the game tournaments painted them as a dangerous and transgressive activity appears to have served as a motivating factor to participate.

Based on ISD's analysis of these tournaments it appears that the main purpose of the tournaments is about building a sense of community within Patriotic Alternative's existing following.

Indeed, Patriotic Alternative published a blog post about the tournament, which stated:

"[M]ultiplayer gaming with racially aware comrades is a very different experience to a lone individual sitting in his bedroom playing in complete isolation. In PA's Warzone competitions, dozens of nationalists get together to play and spend that time interacting with like-minded people. Voice chat is an important part of the gameplay in a team-based game like Warzone, so most of the people who participate in the PA livestreams can chat with fellow players both before and during the games. This gives everyone an excellent opportunity to make new nationalist contacts and strengthen their friendships with those they already know. In short, it's a free and easy way for us to "meet" online and network with one another."

Additionally, the blog post did note added that "as a bonus" the broad popularity of online gaming meant that tournaments and livestreams provided a secondary opportunity to attract people to their movement who may otherwise have not been engaged by traditional propaganda channels.

Commentary during the game in the tournaments which ISD viewed related primarily to gameplay, rather than expounding on political or ideological topics. However, pauses in the gameplay were occasionally used to promote the members of the white nationalist community with whom he was playing, and give them a platform to talk about their other projects. This reflects that the broader goal of the gaming tournaments is to build up the white nationalist community, network and create connections.

The extreme right's ambivalent use of DLive

There does not appear to be a strong attachment by members of the extreme right community to DLive above other alternative platforms. The community has a need for specific capabilities – for example the ability to stream, the ability to monetise their content or accept donations – and for a time, DLive's combination of lax content moderation and easy monetisation served those purposes.

However, DLive does not deliver a particularly good user experience. All of the 6.5 hours of livestreams which ISD watched as part of this research dropped in and out, in some cases to the point of being almost unwatchable. This was clearly a point of frustration for the streamers themselves as well, based on comments during streams and on other social media channels.



Figure 1: A user discusses leaving DLive

ISD's investigation into DLive coincided with a period of significant change for the platform and its relationship to extreme right actors. The use of at least nine DLive channels to livestream the incursion into the US Capitol building on January 6th, and the subsequent critical attention this has drawn from media and law enforcement, appear to have galvanised a crackdown in content moderation.

DLive's efforts⁸ to make their platform less hospitable to extreme right actors seem to be having an impact. Major extreme right figures are leaving the platform, either involuntarily as their accounts are suspended, in response to DLive's demonetisation of their channels, or apparently of their own volition. In general, the response from the far-right community appears to be a combination of derision and acceptance, and a swift pivot to new platforms, with Trovo and Odysee appearing to be the most popular alternative platforms.

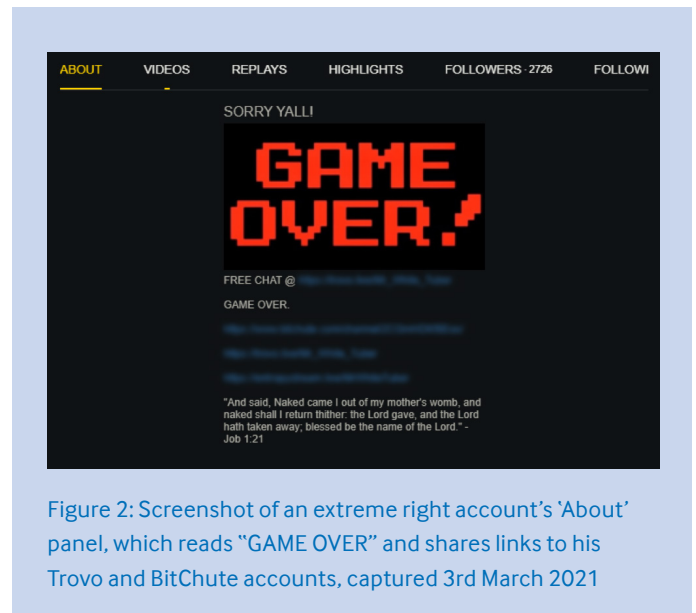


Figure 2: Screenshot of an extreme right account's 'About' panel, which reads "GAME OVER" and shares links to his Trovo and BitChute accounts, captured 3rd March 2021

Influential figures and community members on the extreme right have responded to increasingly frequent crackdowns and deplatforming by adopting highly flexible, multi-platform strategies to maintain their presence online. They have learned to shift quickly from one platform to another, and to operate across a range of platforms for a variety of different purposes. They need specific capabilities on a platform but are not dependent on specific platforms.

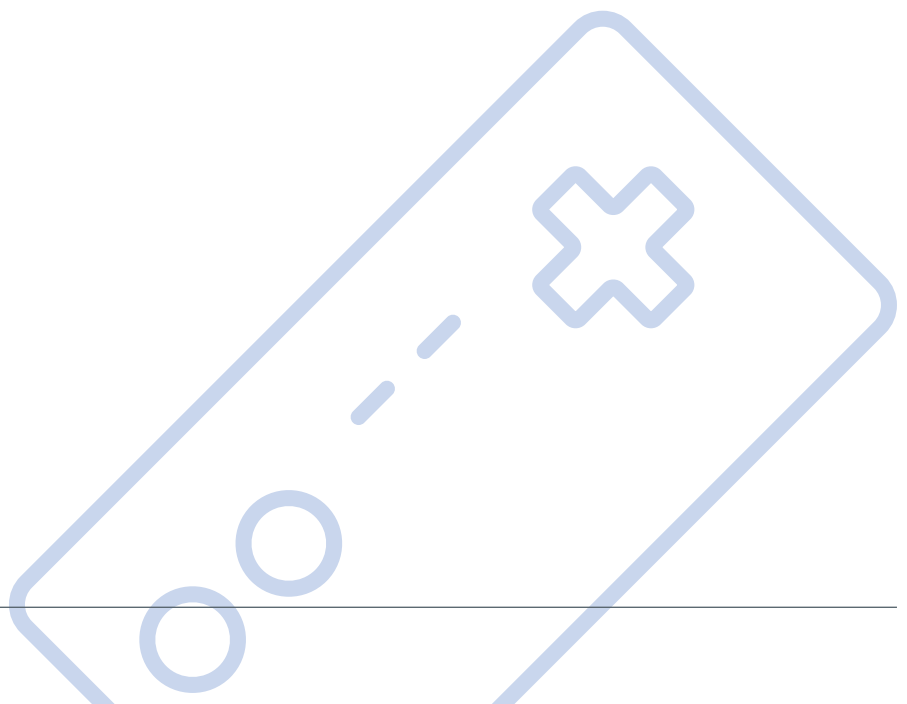
Prior to the events of 6th January 2021, DLive had a reputation amongst the extreme right community as a good place to stream because of its weak content moderation and in-built ability to monetise content. This made it more appealing than other comparable streaming platforms and attracted far-right streamers to it.

In the wake of 6th January, when the use of DLive to stream the incursion into the Capitol led to negative media coverage of the platform,⁹ DLive essentially removed the factors which had incentivised the growth of the far-right community on its platform. It demonetised political streamers – which included the large majority of extreme right streamers – and began enforcing content moderation policies, including banning influential figures. As a result, it appears that DLive is no longer a more appealing platform than alternatives like Trovo or Odysee, and members of the far-right and extreme right community are therefore moving elsewhere.

Conclusion

Through our analysis it becomes apparent that extreme right influencers have an ambivalent relationship with DLive and used it for the brief window of time it provided them a safe harbour, rather than out of any affection for the platform. Over the course of our analysis this safe harbour closed, and many users left the platform for more viable alternatives, such as Trovo and Odysee. Crucially, what this demonstrates is the broader strategy extreme right influencers deploy in a digital environment which is increasingly hostile to them – preferring to spread their bets and operate across multiple platforms simultaneously than prioritise one particular platform. This highlights the resilient nature of the extreme right, and demonstrates how in an ecosystem where alternative platforms are constantly appearing, although it is possible to frustrate their efforts to reach their audiences, it is not possible to fully moderate their activity.

An analysis of extremist gaming livestreams on DLive suggests that these broadcasts primarily function as a way to connect with and strengthen existing extremist communities, with the possibility of reaching new audiences seen as a “bonus” rather than the chief objective of such work. This observation matches those made on Steam and Discord, which suggest that gaming acts to strengthen bonds between already radicalised individuals, rather than as a strategic tool for the targeting and radicalisation of new audiences.



Methodology

To inform our analysis of the extreme right use of DLive ISD analysts first sought to identify accounts on the platform associated with the extreme right. **To identify these accounts, we employed a mixed methodology, both searching for messages linking out to DLive from known extremist hubs, and through manual analysis of the platform, including searching for known extremists and keywords linked to the extreme right wing.**

To identify messages linking out to DLive from known extremist hubs we scanned 4chan's politically incorrect board, 8kun and Telegram. For 4chan and 8kun this was done through Google advanced searches in February 2021 (e.g. searching 'site:4chan.org "DLive"' and a name or keyword). To find DLive accounts shared on Telegram, ISD searched the same repository of Telegram posts which was used to identify Discord servers.

Through this process we identified 100 DLive channels which appeared to be connected to extreme right wing activity. To verify the nature of these channels researchers additionally performed a qualitative analysis on hosted content or content in the About section of the accounts where possible, paying attention to the use of language or imagery associated with extreme right wing ideology. However, here it should be caveated that there was often limited information available for many of these accounts on DLive, making it difficult to determine whether the user was based in the UK or targeting UK audiences.

To help circumnavigate this barrier we sought to identify the footprint of these users on other social media platforms through searching for identical usernames or following links to these platforms provided in their DLive profiles, and then qualitatively analysed these external profiles for evidence of extreme right wing affiliation.

Through this process we identified a total of **14 DLive accounts which appeared to be linked to extreme right wing activity in the UK**, either through self-identifying as British, using British imagery in the About section, or specifically linking to or referencing UK-based extreme right groups such as Patriotic Alternative. Of these accounts seven appeared to be used for both extremist activity and gaming. Additionally, we identified **60 accounts** which appeared to be used to discuss current events from an extreme

right perspective, and **26 accounts which appear to support white nationalism or white supremacy.**

Given the specific focus of this study on the role gaming plays in UK-based extreme right mobilisation we prioritised qualitative analysis of the content produced by the 7 accounts which appeared to be linked to the UK and used for both extreme right mobilisation and gaming.

Barriers to analysis

Throughout the course of our analysis of DLive, we identified several structural barriers to analysis. These were posed by the nature of DLive as a platform, which limited its utility for in-depth qualitative analysis of extremist activity:

- Information available on the platform:** The first barrier encountered was that many accounts on DLive have limited information available on their platform biographies, which meant that verifying relevance to extremist activity was time intensive for analysts.
- Availability of historic video content on DLive:** Beyond biographic information relating to users, accessibility of video content on the DLive platform was also limited with the majority of users identified on the platform not keeping recorded livestreams on the platform. This meant that analysing the historic activity of DLive users was challenging.
- Accessibility of livestreams on the platform:** The lack of historic video data available on the platform meant that researchers were required to watch streams on the platform live, which were often hosted at erratic hours and were not always announced ahead of time, meaning that identifying content to qualitatively analyse was challenging. Additionally, researchers encountered streams which were often exceedingly long (upwards of seven hours in some cases) which due to their live nature were not able to be skipped through, resulting in major investment in analysts' time without guarantees that the content being viewed was useful for research purposes. In some cases, it was possible to view content originally streamed on DLive on other platforms, where users had uploaded recordings (for example on Odysee), and this proved to be a more efficient method for analysis where available.

Endnotes

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