Uisce Faoi Thalamh

An Investigation Into the Online Mis- and Disinformation Ecosystem in Ireland

Report 1 of 3 Summary report

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About the research

This report is part of Uisce Faoi Thalamh, ISD's investigation into the online mis- and disinformation ecosystem in Ireland. It is part of a broader research project that analyses the most prominent actors, topics and online platforms central to this ecosystem.

The research project contains three reports. The first is this report, the Summary Report, which includes an introduction, key findings and recommendations arising from the research project, as well as a literature review, glossary and methodology. The second is Platforms, which examines how online platforms are used to produce, promote and contribute to the circulation of mis- and disinformation in Ireland. The third is Topics, which presents in-depth narrative analysis of the leading topics of discussions within this mis- and disinformation ecosystem.

About ISD

ISD is a fiercely independent 'think and action tank' dedicated to safeguarding democracy and reversing the rising global tide of hate, extremism and disinformation in all its forms. We combine 18 years of sector-leading expertise in weaponised hate, disinformation and extremism with state-of-the art digital research methods and bespoke technologies, keeping ISD consistently ahead of the curve in understanding and responding to the fast evolving, hybridised threat landscape, on- and offline. We use the threat intelligence and insights derived from our research to innovate and deliver proven models for action, and to provide agenda-setting evidence and support to policy makers. ISD's cross-harms focus on a range of 'hybridised' online threats, means it has unique insights on the intersection of disinformation, conspiracy movements and extremism.

Since 2020, ISD has researched and analysed extremism, disinformation and hate online in Ireland. This has resulted in the publication of a number of reports and engagement by ISD with civil society organisations, academia and governmental departments. Most recently, in early 2023, ISD was invited by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to be a member of a multi-stakeholder working group to help develop Ireland's National Counter Disinformation Strategy.[1]

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Executive Summary

This is the first landscape study of the online ecosystem where mis- and disinformation and conspiracy theories thrive in Ireland. The objective of this research was to understand, in an Irish context, how belief in conspiracy theories and mis- and/or disinformation brings distinct communities together; radicalises some into extreme belief systems; and motivates people to take real world action that sometimes results in violence.[3]

This report explores the pandemic years and what has followed. It shines a light on how this mis- and disinformation ecosystem has been successfully co-opted by far-right actors who, after pandemic restrictions eased, have diverted attention towards targeting vulnerable communities. This more recent activity has revolved around mobilising against immigration by framing asylum seekers or refugees as an existential threat to Ireland and spreading hateful falsehoods about the LGBTQ+ community.

The analysis draws on over 13 million posts published across 12 online platforms between 2020 and 2023. It examines the presence of individuals, organisations, alternative media and political parties involved in the dissemination of falsehoods about a range of topics. The results of this research indicate that the influence of the far-right in Ireland is growing.[4] It also makes clear that tech companies are failing to enforce community guidelines designed to curb the spread of false, misleading and harmful content and activity on social media platforms and, in turn, emboldening the reach and influence of the far-right in Ireland.

Key Findings

The research in this report was conducted on **13,180,820 posts** from **1,640 accounts** across **12 online platforms**.

The key findings are organised under the three main focus areas of this research: platforms, actors and topics.

Platforms

Activity within the mis- and disinformation ecosystem is growing.
Across all platforms, the level of activity from actors, including the number of posts and engagement levels, as well as the number of active accounts, increased year-on-year between 2020 – 2023.

Social media platforms are not successfully enforcing their own community guidelines.
Over the course of this study, which spans many different topic areas, ISD identified examples of content that appeared to be in clear violation of the platform-in-question's community guidelines. These findings highlight a clear and obvious enforcement gap on platforms that allows false, misleading or harmful content to survive, receive engagement and potentially encourage people to take action.

Twitter (now named X) is the platform where the most activity within this mis- and disinformation ecosystem occurred.
Twitter (X) is the home of the highest number of accounts in the analysis and is used by virtually all of the most prominent actors in the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem which we studied. For eight out of the nine topics analysed, it was the platform where most of the conversation took place.

Facebook still plays a role within the mis- and disinformation ecosystem, but some trends indicate that its popularity may be waning.
Facebook groups and pages experienced a surge in growth early in the pandemic, but activity levels and interaction rates appear to be plateauing as users move to different platforms.

Instagram activity is small but concerning.
Although the number of Instagram accounts active within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem is low, there are a number of prominent accounts with outsized influence that use the platform to spread harmful claims about immigrants, LGBTQ+ communities and Holocaust denial.

Telegram continues to be a key platform for organisation and discussion.
The messaging app became a significant hub from 2021 onwards and trends show that activity on the platform is continuing to grow. There is a noteworthy presence of international figures such as Tommy Robinson and Russian state media within discussions on Telegram.

Actors within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem are struggling to break through on TikTok.
Most accounts found on TikTok were subsequently suspended, but analysis shows that videos posted on the platform reached more than one million viewers, indicating how influential it can be for harmful content that slips through moderation.

The use of monetisation and fundraising platforms is widespread within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem.
At least 41 entities are utilising fundraising mechanisms online, with many of these breaking platform terms of service by doing so.

Actors

Hateful ideologies spread with ease.
Across platforms analysed, hateful and harmful content was easily discoverable within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem. Support for white nationalism, antisemitism and Islamophobia were observed on platforms like Telegram and Instagram, while Holocaust denial and the promotion of Nazi material by Irish actors was constant on alternative platforms like Gettr and Gab.

Far-right groups and individuals are drivers of mis- and disinformation in Ireland.
Across the majority of topics, the most prolific and most popular actors were often figures with a history of advocating for far-right ideologies on- and offline. These figures play a crucial role in producing and promoting false, misleading and potentially harmful claims in the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem.

Alternative media outlets play an outsized role within this mis- and disinformation ecosystem.
Across topics and platforms, content from alternative

media outlets is extremely popular. Such outlets produce content that is conspiratorial and confrontational towards mainstream media, and their coverage of sensitive topics can provide a veneer of credibility to rumours and unverified claims circulating within this ecosystem.

Most topics are highly interconnected.
Network mapping analysis shows that the same actors are involved in discussing varying topics, with the closest links seen between conversations about health, Irish politics and immigration. 5G and ethnonationalism and hate are the least connected, but still have strong links to health and immigration discussions respectively.

Topics

COVID-19 was a catalyst for mis- and disinformation.
Our research found that narratives around health information activated many actors within this mis- and disinformation ecosystem and produced false claims that provided others with a conspiratorial lens through which to view the world. Though the pandemic is now over, discussions about health remained high in volume into late 2022 and conspiratorial narratives have grown throughout the period studied.

The mis- and disinformation ecosystem quickly turned its attention to other topics when pandemic restrictions lifted.
A swift drop in discussions about health-related matters was observed from the beginning of 2022. After that, discussions focused on the war in Ukraine, before immigration and LGBTQ+ issues then became the topics of choice during the early months of 2023.

Mis- and disinformation is popular.
Discussions related to all nine topics were varied and featured plenty of content that can be considered healthy debate and legitimate criticism. However, as demonstrated in the top-performing posts from each topic, false, misleading and conspiratorial content was the most popular among actors across the mis- and disinformation ecosystem.

Online discussions containing mis- and disinformation fuel offline hostility and violence.
False information and conspiracy theories shared online can be a successful means of mobilising people offline. Anti-lockdown protests were fuelled by false claims about

COVID-19 and vaccines, while anti-immigration rhetoric not only led people to the streets but resulted in cases of vigilante-style violence. More recently, false and hateful claims about the LGBTQ+ community have encouraged protests in libraries, bookshops and schools.

Leading government figures were regularly discussed within the mis- and disinformation ecosystem.
ISD observed threatening and violent rhetoric aimed at Irish politicians in relation to the introduction of restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19, the arrival to Ireland of tens of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers from 2022 onwards, and teaching children about LGBTQ+ issues.

Climate is becoming an increasingly important topic within the mis- and disinformation ecosystem.
Discussions about climate change are being exploited by far-right political parties in an effort to position themselves as the 'true defenders' of rural interests. Such discussions often frame climate change as part of a broader 'culture war', trivialising the issue, denying the scientific evidence behind it, and portraying it as a conspiracy to control the population.

Recommendations

1. Social Media Regulation and Platform Policy Enforcement

Platforms must invest more in proactive investigative approaches to better understand how bad actors exploit platform design and use networks to spread false information, which would strengthen current moderation techniques. Assessing the effectiveness of interventions such as fact-checking labels on content containing false information should also be a priority for both platforms and regulators.

ISD's report comes at a time of great change in the regulation of online platforms, with the recent introduction of both the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) and Ireland's Online Safety and Media Regulation Act (OSMR).[5] [6] Both pieces of legislation aim to create safer digital spaces and protect users against harmful and illegal content.

The findings of this report show that mainstream social media platforms are failing at enforcing the policies they currently hold on false, misleading and harmful content. Posts containing mis- and disinformation continue to receive significant engagement, often boosted by algorithmic systems.

Algorithmic transparency is essential for understanding and countering harmful mis- and disinformation. Although there is certainly a need for content-based approaches to tackle such issues, particularly around the spread of illegal content, regulators should also prioritise focusing on the systems that allow such content to proliferate and reach large audiences.

2. The Role of Alternative Platforms

A coordinated approach is needed towards smaller, alternative platforms that lack the policies and moderation of larger platforms. They should be encouraged to learn from larger platforms about what works and what doesn't in terms of moderation. Increased transparency about these platforms' moderation policies should also be supported and incentivised. As the Irish regulator will be the body in charge of assessing such platforms, it is in a unique position to encourage this kind of coordination.

Although this report shows that platforms such as Gab and Gettr are sparsely used within the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem at the moment, the content shared by Irish users in these spaces is more extreme than what was found on mainstream platforms. Additionally, Telegram has emerged as a key organising space in the Irish mis- and disinformation ecosystem since 2021 and has few safeguards in place against harmful content.

While none of these platforms currently meet the threshold for user numbers that would require them to comply with the stricter requirements for Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) under the DSA, they will have to comply with certain rules, including removing illegal content and creating clear terms of service.

3. Data Access and Transparency

Regulators should ensure that adequate data can be accessed and analysed by trusted researchers. This access should consider the privacy of users, but also enable a greater understanding of the online environment.

As the limitations section below outlines, there are many restraints when conducting this kind of research, with many of these related to the lack of data access provided by different platforms. While this report sheds needed light on the mis- and disinformation ecosystem in Ireland, there is still much of the ecosystem left unexplored and many questions still to answer, especially around platform responses to false information.

While the DSA includes transparency and data access obligations for platforms, these will differ for VLOPS and non-VLOPS. A lack of clarity over how such access will be governed will also mean that this picture is likely to grow more complex.

4. Further Research and Monitoring

Regulators and policymakers should be proactive at creating a robust and ethical framework for conducting this kind of research which safeguards user privacy and protects the researchers conducting such analysis. This research should be appropriately funded and resourced with transparency around how it is conducted.

The online mis- and disinformation ecosystem is in a constant state of flux with dynamics, strategies and discussions continuously changing and evolving. In order to properly understand and counter the harms that come from the proliferation of such falsehoods, consistent monitoring and analysis is required.

Glossary

All Lives Matter
The slogan "all lives matter" has its origins as an inclusive alternative to the "Black lives matter" slogan for those who felt this was a divisive or exclusionary term. However, this phrase has also been adopted by extremist and hate groups to highlight alleged hypocrisy by racial justice protests or to discredit the Black Lives Matter movement.[7]

Antisemitism
ISD refers to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) definition of antisemitism as ""a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred towards Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed towards Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, towards Jewish community institutions and religious facilities."[8]

Conspiracy theory
Theories which seek 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. Supporters of conspiracy theories usually see themselves as in direct opposition to the powers who are orchestrating the plot which are typically governments or figures of authority.

Disinformation
Disinformation is false, misleading or manipulated content presented as fact, that is intended to deceive or harm.

Doxxing
Doxxing refers to the publication of a person's private information online against their will or without their consent. Doxxing includes, for example, the publication of residential addresses.

Ecosystem
In this report, the terms "ecosystem" or "mis- and disinformation ecosystem" are used to identify the entire list of entities and accounts in Ireland analysed in this research. See the methodology section for details on how the ecosystem was built.

Ethnonationalism
ISD defines ethnonationalism as 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. Ethnonationalists are often marked by the implicit promotion of racism and exclusionary attitudes and rarely promote overt supremacism.

Extremism
Extremism is the advocacy of a system of belief that claims the superiority and dominance of one identity-based 'in-group' over all 'out-groups.' It propagates a dehumanising 'othering' mind-set that is antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights.

Fake news
Fake news is false or misleading content presented as news and expressed in written, printed, electronic, and digital communication.[9] The term has also become politicised in recent years and used as a pejorative term to discredit others with opposing viewpoints. For these reasons, it is not widely used in research and is only cited in this research to reference its use by other researchers.

Far-right
In line with Dutch political scientist and far-right expert Cas Mudde, ISD defines the far-right as groups and individuals exhibiting at least three of the following five features: nationalism, racism, xenophobia, anti-democracy or strong state advocacy.[10]

Hate
Hate is understood to relate to beliefs or practices that attack, malign, delegitimise or exclude an entire class of people based in immutable characteristics, including their ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or disability. Hate actors are understood to be individuals, groups or communities which actively and overtly engage in the above activity, as well as those who implicitly attack classes of people through, for example, the use of conspiracy theories and disinformation. Hateful activity is understood to be antithetical to pluralism and the universal application of human rights.

Islamisation
Islamisation describes the process by which the religion of Islam has spread across the world alongside associated Muslim customs, culture and traditions. The term has also come to be used with negative connotations as an

Islamophobic trope to describe the supposed imposition of an ultra-conservative Islamic social and political system on a traditionally non-Muslim country or culture.[11] Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks and, more recently, the growth of ISIS and Islamist terrorism, the term has been used to promote suspicion, anger and hatred against Muslims.

Misinformation

Misinformation is false, misleading or manipulated content presented as fact, irrespective of an intent to deceive.

Nativism

The term nativism refers to a political ideology or movement that stands for the prioritisation of the interests of "native inhabitants" of a country or region over those of immigrants and newcomers.

QAnon conspiracy theory

The conspiratorial movement known as QAnon began in late 2017 after anonymous posts began appearing on 4chan and 8chan, anonymous imageboard websites known for being a haven for conspiracy theories, trolling campaigns and extremist rhetoric. The user claimed to be a high-level government insider in the US Department of Energy and called themselves "Q". Over the space of 3 years, Q posted almost 5,000 "drops" containing nonsensical codes and "clues" that they claimed exposed hidden secrets about the US government and wider geopolitics.[12]

QAnon followers decoded these drops and QAnon grew to become the conspiracy theory of everything as it ingested conspiratorial narratives both old and new into its lore. The overarching belief among followers of QAnon is that Donald Trump's presidency was part of a secret decades-long plot to rid the world of a cabal of elites pulling the strings behind the scenes. This cabal, claimed Q, were all secretly involved in child trafficking and/or pedophilia and Trump was planning to bring them to justice, arrest them and execute them in a day of vengeance known as "The Storm".

White Lives Matter

The slogan "White lives matter" has its origins in a racist campaign initiated by white supremacist groups in the US in 2015 in response to the then-emerging Black Lives Matter movement. This campaign purported to seek to address racism against white people but, in reality, it was a vehicle to promote perceived white race victimhood narratives and conspiracies regarding white genocide and replacement.[13]

White nationalism

White nationalism is advocacy for a separate white society or white nation, also sometimes referred to as a white ethnostate. The Anti-Defamation League describes white nationalism as a euphemism for white supremacy; the term is now used to "refer to a form of white supremacy that emphasises defining a country or region by white racial identity and which seeks to promote the interests of whites exclusively, typically at the expense of people of other backgrounds."[14]

Introduction

On 27 February 2021, at the height of Ireland's third and longest lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19, a large crowd gathered on Dublin's Grafton Street. They were there to protest pandemic restrictions and government policies including lockdowns, masks, social distancing and vaccines. As the crowd grew to an estimated 2,000 people, Garda [police] Public Order Units attempted to contain them. Tensions flared. Debris, including bottles of urine, were thrown in the direction of the Gardaí. As one man launched a firework directly at the row of Gardaí, officers baton-charged the crowd, causing panic as people fled down Grafton Street.[15]

The Grafton Street protest was a flashpoint for several reasons. It was a moment during the pandemic that laid bare the frustration and desperation of a population whose lives had been put on pause, and it shone a light on how false information spread online was impacting a segment of the public. Genuine criticism of government policies at the protest was overshadowed by the varied, and often unfounded, beliefs on display. Placards blamed Bill Gates for the pandemic, or the national broadcaster RTÉ, or 5G technology. Many viewed COVID-19 as part of a sinister totalitarian plan to depopulate the world with lethal vaccines. To others, it was all part of the lurid conspiracy theory movement QAnon.[16]

Just as the beliefs were varied, so too were the demographics of those in attendance. A couple of streets away from the violence on Grafton Street, families with young children gathered for protest speeches and a sing-along. As the crowd moved across the city to O'Connell Street, groups of friends could be seen laughing and drinking cans of beer. There were groups of young and old people, urban and rural. Dotted through the masses of people were members of a far-right political party handing out flyers.[17]

What was seen in Ireland was part of a wider trend observed by ISD in countries across the world, where restrictions against COVID-19 had resulted in a new type of protest movement.[18] These movements brought together a wide range of people, groups and ideologies and allowed for the mixing of ideas, narratives and talking points that would not have interacted in the pre-pandemic world.[19]

The result was a mis- and disinformation ecosystem with many constituencies that included anti-vaccine activists, anti-government protesters, right-wing extremists and members of New Age spirituality and wellness movements. These latter two groups would typically fall on the left side of the political spectrum, but during the pandemic they ended up aligned with conspiracy theories emanating from right-wing groups.[20]

The spread of false, misleading or potentially harmful information is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the speed and reach that such information can now attain as a result of advancements in technology, the growth of digital and social media platforms, and the impact of online networks in helping to spread such information.

People, communities, informal and formal groups and organisations can now produce inaccurate, incorrect and unsubstantiated information which has the power to deceive people or entire populations and distribute it at rapid speed across the web. Online platforms can then operate like megaphones that algorithmically amplify or recommend content which is misleading or manipulative and can lead to real world harms.

Disinformation can be difficult to define. ISD defines it as false, misleading or manipulated content presented as fact that is intended to deceive or harm. Yet even this is somewhat simplistic and overly focused on content. False identities, fake campaigns or artificial popularity are also part of the playbook for actors intent on deceiving others online. Most research agrees on the underlying intent behind disinformation yet even this is problematic for researchers to understand or evidence.

Misinformation, on the other hand, is false information that is spread regardless of an intent, including damaging and harmful rumours or decontextualised claims. It can include information that is intimidating and threatening towards perceived critics in media, politics or wider society.

Every person online has the potential to be exposed to false information on any number of topics, themes or narratives. Much of this is benign and does not negatively impact the public, but misleading and false information can pose a threat to democracy and human rights.[21]

Mis- and disinformation and extremism often go hand in hand and can fuel the risk of radicalisation or form part of extremist groups' tactics to grow support for their movement and capitalise on divisive public issues. Ireland has not escaped this phenomenon. The 2020/21 period saw far-right groups and conspiratorial movements produce and promote false and misleading COVID-19 claims and mobilise on the streets against pandemic restrictions, while groups inspired by similar claims have harassed politicians at their homes.[22]

Mis- and disinformation thrive on attention, and bad actors are often motivated by manipulating others into unintentionally amplifying their campaigns. In researching or reporting on such entities, this may also help to unintentionally amplify the reach of disinformation, illustrating the challenge and responsibility that researching and countering disinformation requires.[23]

In response to the growing challenge of mis- and disinformation, various legal and regulatory initiatives have been considered, developed or introduced at the national and EU level. These attempt to balance the need to combat potential harms with policies that protect the right to freedom of expression, foster media plurality and defend other fundamental rights. In this regard, mis- and disinformation are considered harmful but legal in the context of legislation such as the Digital Services Act.[24]

Prioritising a human rights-based approach to countering mis- and disinformation is just one of the core challenges. Tackling mis- and disinformation requires actions on several fronts. It requires adequate funding and resources to research and support countermeasures, coordinating efforts between government departments and research institutions, and engaging with technology platforms. In addition, it is vital to support and expand media and digital literacy across society.

The Digital Services Act will potentially transform the existing EU Code of Practice on Disinformation into a co-regulatory Code of Conduct. This would compel its signatories - major technology and online advertising organisations - to commit to the demonetisation of mis- and disinformation, the transparency of political advertising, and ensuring the empowerment of fact checkers and researchers.[25] In Ireland, the Electoral Reform Act 2022 and the Online Safety and Media and Regulation (OSMR) Act also have provisions to assist in countering such activity. It's clear that misinformation and disinformation represent a growing concern for democracies and societies like Ireland. In 2019, 61% of Irish respondents in the annual Digital News Report said they were concerned about distinguishing what is real or fake on the internet.[26] This increased to 62% and 65% in 2020 and 2021, respectively.[27] In 2022, this figure dipped to 58% though Ireland was still higher than the EU average of 48% and, in 2023, this figure again increased to 64%.[28]

ISD has conducted this research to help meet these growing challenges. Our research analysed mis- and disinformation in Ireland, examining actors, topics and platforms involved in this phenomenon in extensive detail. The result is, we believe, the most comprehensive study of the Irish mis- and disinformation landscape to date.

Literature Review

There is a small but growing field of research examining the issue of mis- and disinformation in Ireland produced by academic institutions as well as NGOs, charities and news organisations. It is still an under-explored landscape in comparison to larger jurisdictions like the US and the UK.[29]

This literature review aims to detail the various research projects, reports and news reports that have examined different aspects of this issue within Ireland to date with a view to identifying knowledge gaps that projects such as this one and future research can address.

Topics

Most research and reportage undertaken to date that examines mis- and disinformation in Ireland has focused on identifying and analysing specific topics that have attracted interest from a wide range of actors and garnered significant attention on social and digital media.

Narrative-focused research has mostly focused on COVID-19. As noted in a briefing report on Disinformation in Ireland published by the Ireland hub for the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), COVID-19 "marked a major turning point for disinformation in Ireland as conspiracy theorists, right-wing extremists, and anti-establishment protestors gained prominence on online platforms."[30]

EDMO's report identified how recurring COVID-19 vaccine related narratives exploit "news stories about celebrity deaths; sudden deaths, especially among young people, and excess deaths."[31] The Platforming Harm project, funded by the Irish Research Council under the COALESCE programme, also conducted research to understand the narratives on health and vaccines circulating on digital (mainstream and alternative) platforms during and after the pandemic.[32]

ISD has analysed the spread of mis- and disinformation related to COVID-19 in a number of reports. The 2021 report Ill Advice examined many false and misleading COVID-related topics including claims about COVID-19's lethality, claims related to alternative treatments, and claims about vaccines.[33] An earlier briefing released in 2021 focused solely on vaccine misinformation topics.[34] ISD's Layers of Lies and Anti-lockdown Ireland reports, though primarily focused on actors, also included

analysis on the production and promotion of COVID-19 conspiracy theories, mis- and disinformation.[35]

False and misleading claims linked to COVID-19 received widespread coverage from news organisations like the Irish Examiner, Irish Times and RTÉ, as well as many others.[36] TheJournal.ie, Ireland's sole fact-checking organisation, has published numerous explainers, investigations and reports debunking claims that received significant attention online.[37]

Other health-related topics are receiving increased focus too. In 2021 the Irish Cancer Society awarded a research grant to researchers from the University of Galway to study misinformation and disinformation related to cancer.[38]

Narratives and claims related to immigration have also received interest from researchers. EDMO's briefing report explored the spread of nativist narratives in Ireland and noted how racist mis- and disinformation was used by Irish actors to "strengthen links with international right-wing extremists who were asked to participate in an online campaign promoting disinformation and hate speech."[39] ISD's Layers of Lies report similarly explored how ethnonationalist narratives were used to promote racist memes, encourage anti-immigrant sentiment or glorify violence or intimidation against ethnic minorities in Ireland.[40]

News coverage reporting on the spread of anti-immigrant misinformation and conspiracy theories has also been published by organisations such as the Irish Independent, Irish Times and TheJournal.ie's Noteworthy platform, among others.[41]

Other topics subject to research include science denial and environmental mis- and disinformation narratives, covered in EDMO's briefing report, as well as anti-LGBTQ+ mis- and disinformation, similarly covered in EDMO's briefing report as well as ISD's Layers of Lies report.[42] TheJournal.ie has also published fact checks on these topics.[43]

Researchers from the SFI ADAPT Centre at Trinity College Dublin and University College Dublin are leading the VIGILANT project which focuses at a broader level on detecting and analysing mis- and disinformation that leads to criminal activities.[44]

Actors

Research that focuses on the spread and reach of mis- and disinformation in Ireland from an actor-centric perspective is another small but growing field. STOPFARRIGHT, a research project based out of Maynooth University, is exploring how best to push back against the growth of far-right communities and groups in Ireland, with a specific focus on how these entities use mis- and disinformation to achieve their goals and advance their ideologies. [45]

EDMO's briefing report summarised the different types of actors (and their tactics) that propagate mis- and disinformation online in Ireland, while ISD's Anti-lockdown Ireland, Ill Advice and Layers of Lies reports also explored a range of actors active in spreading false and misleading claims on a variety of topics.[46]

Analysis led by Hope Not Hate and the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism has profiled a number of actors responsible for producing and promoting mis- and disinformation in Ireland.[47] Research has consistently illustrated the link between extremist entities and their use of mis- and disinformation to promote their ideologies, spread misleading and potentially harmful claims, target critics, and encourage hostility and hatred against others.

News reports that have profiled groups and individuals active in promoting conspiracy theories, mis- and disinformation in Ireland have been published by the Irish Independent and Irish Times, among others.[48]

Platforms

Research that focuses on analysing and assessing platform responses to online mis- and disinformation, particularly as they relate to Ireland, is still an under-developed field and represents a clear avenue for future work. By their nature, online platforms allow for communication and activity that reaches across borders and these issues are inherently transnational as a result.

This means that research which focuses on single jurisdictions (especially smaller nations such as Ireland) can be challenging. Yet, the need for oversight and accountability from platforms to strengthen democracies and enhance current and future regulation and legislation at national and international levels means such targeted research is vital.

One of the most illustrative pieces of research in this regard has been CovidCheck, a monitoring report conducted by the Institute for Future Media, Democracy and Society at Dublin City University, which assessed the implementation of the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation in Ireland.[49] The report, which provided analysis of 47 monthly transparency reports, published by online platforms who are signatories to the code, found that more robust procedures for reporting and monitoring online mis- and disinformation need to be developed for the code to become a more effective tool in addressing this issue.

Research projects that focus on topics and actors often include insights about the role of platforms in facilitating the spread of mis- and disinformation. Such research from Ireland that includes insights on the role of platforms includes ISD's Ill Advice report, which looked specifically at Facebook's efforts at tackling COVID-19 mis- and disinformation; and the COALESCE project, which has similarly examined COVID-19 narratives but included mainstream and fringe platforms in its analysis.[50]

Researchers from UCD's Geary Institute explored how social media platforms were used to communicate evidence-informed responses to COVID-19 during the pandemic as a means to counteract misinformation.[51]

The Public

Another area receiving growing interest is research examining how false and misleading information impacts the public. Research from University College Cork, conducted in the weeks leading up to the country's 2018 referendum on abortion rights, explored the impact of fake news reports on creating false memories in participants, and found that people are more vulnerable to believing fake news stories if these match their own personal worldviews or ideologies.[52]

A study conducted by researchers in Dublin City University examined susceptibility to anti-immigrant mis- and disinformation while researchers with the Royal Society similarly explored susceptibility to COVID-19 misinformation in five national samples including Ireland.[53]

Countermeasures

Research has also begun to focus on piloting and assessing the efficacy of potential countermeasures.

EDMO's briefing report explored the application of such strategies including the use of pre-bunking to help people develop resilience against mis- and disinformation. This included a summary of a pre-bunking campaign developed in 2022 to counter common false claims about the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[54]

The STOPFARRIGHT project's remit includes researching the development of strategies, narratives and initiatives that could be used to resist far-right discourse, which includes the use of mis- and disinformation, and ways to empower vulnerable communities.[55]

Alongside its ongoing fact-checking work, in 2022 TheJournal.ie also concluded an 18-month project called the Good Information Project which sought to engage with their audience and share insights into their newsgathering practices, all with the overarching aim of boosting trust in news reporting, supporting media literacy and helping develop resilience against misinformation.[56]

Similarly, Media Literacy Ireland's Be Media Smart campaign was developed to help people tell the difference between reliable and accurate information and deliberately false or misleading information.[57]

Conclusion

Research from different organisations has explored the issue of mis- and disinformation in Ireland from a range of perspectives and the field is growing. More research that investigates these dynamics, explores how they overlap, and expands on previous research efforts is needed.

To address this gap, this ISD research aims to produce a landscape study examining, in depth, the constellation of actors who are most active in producing and promoting mis- and disinformation, the topics they focus on and how they use online platforms to disseminate and amplify these topics.

Methodology

Building the Mis- and Disinformation Ecosystem

To build the seed list of actors and accounts to be included in the analysis, a number of steps were followed.

1. ISD analysts gathered accounts that were still active from previous research focussed on Ireland, which included investigating far-right activity on Telegram,[58] mis- and disinformation related to COVID-19 on Facebook[59], and the hybrid threat environment that emerged from the anti-lockdown movement.[60] Accounts were also gathered from research into Irish mis- or disinformation conducted by organisations outside of ISD (see literature review).

2. This initial list was then built upon in the following ways:
   - To find an entity's accounts across all platforms of interest, subsequent searches were conducted on Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, TikTok, Gab, BitChute, Odysee, Rumble, DLive and Gettr;
   - A "snowballing" methodology was used on platforms such as Telegram, where further channels and chats were found by following forwarded posts back to their original channel/chat;
   - On platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X) and TikTok, the recommendation algorithm was used to find similar groups/pages/accounts;
   - Where domains were identified as associated with specific entities, the link checker tool available through CrowdTangle (a content discovery and social media analysis platform), was used to identify further accounts sharing this content;
   - By finding accounts which boosted an entity's content on platforms such as Twitter (X) by liking and retweeting their posts; and
   - Engaging in a two-month period of ethnographic monitoring to discover new relevant accounts and platforms of note.

3. An assessment was then conducted on all entities gathered to date to ensure they were relevant to Ireland, with four tiers of relevance identified:
   - A social media entity is affiliated with a known individual, organisation or movement based in Ireland;
   - A social media entity shares content that is expressly focussed on Ireland (e.g. a Facebook group called "Irish Patriots");
   - A social media entity that is not solely focussed on Ireland, but Irish individuals are associated with the movement/organisation in a leadership or management capacity; and
   - Ambiguous cases where an account is partially focussed on Ireland which were assessed for inclusion on a case-by-case basis (e.g. Twitter (X) accounts that share content related to the UK and Ireland).

4. A further assessment was then conducted on the content shared by each entity to ensure it fit into the definitional framework used to build the mis- and disinformation ecosystem. That is, that the entities had previously shared false/misleading information or conspiracy theories or had used hateful mis- or disinformation narratives to describe and/or target particular groups (e.g. the LGBTQ+ community, migrants etc). At least three examples of such content were noted, archived and/or saved as screenshots. Where such content could not be found, the entity was removed from the mis- and disinformation ecosystem as part of a validation exercise.

5. To remove insignificant accounts, analysts also removed Twitter (X) accounts that had both less than 100 tweets and less than 100 followers.

6. The remaining entities were then categorised as follows:
   - **Alternative media**: Has a website and identifiable linked social media entities where they post articles and/or multimedia content across platforms. These entities position themselves as an alternative to "mainstream" or "legacy" media organisations;
   - **Individuals**: Named and identifiable public figures with linked social media entities across platforms;
   - **Organisations**: Has a website and linked social media entities across platforms. Acts as an activist group or organisation with a mission;
   - **Political Party**: Groups registered as an official political party in the Republic of Ireland (including regional entities);[61]
   - **Cross-platform accounts**: No website but does have linked social media entities across 2+ platforms (often anonymous);

- **Telegram channel/chat**: Standalone chats or channels on Telegram only, not identifiably linked to an individual/organisation;
- **Facebook group/page**: Standalone groups/pages on Facebook only, not identifiably linked to an individual/organisation;
- **Twitter (X) account**: Standalone, anonymous account on Twitter (X), not identifiably linked to an individual/organisation;
- **Instagram account**: Standalone, anonymous Instagram account, not identifiably linked to an individual/organisation;
- **YouTube account**: Standalone, anonymous YouTube account, not identifiably linked to an individual/organisation;
- **TikTok account**: Standalone, anonymous TikTok account, not identifiably linked to an individual/organisation; and
- **Other**: Standalone accounts on alternative platforms such as Gab, Odysee, Gettr, not identifiably linked to an individual/organisation.

7. The list remaining at the end of this process consisted of 1,640 total accounts:
    - 1,158 Twitter (X) accounts
    - 146 Facebook groups/pages
    - 27 Instagram accounts
    - 111 Telegram channels/chats
    - 43 YouTube channels
    - 34 TikTok accounts
    - 36 Gab accounts
    - 23 BitChute accounts
    - 22 Odysee accounts
    - 23 Rumble accounts
    - 4 Dlive accounts
    - 13 Gettr accounts

Analysing the Mis- and Disinformation Ecosystem

Since different platforms have different levels of access through Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) to analyse public data at scale, a 'mixed methods' approach was employed that used both quantitative and qualitative research. Two specific types of analysis were conducted — platform analysis and narrative analysis.

1. Platform analysis
- **Twitter (X), Telegram, YouTube**: ISD used an analytical tool to gather data from all the accounts from 1 January 2020 to 3 April 2023. Metrics for account creation dates, follower numbers, interaction rates and the volume of posts over time were analysed using our analytical software. Content was analysed using keyword lists created for each topic and measuring their popularity over the time period (see below for more on this).
- **Facebook, Instagram**: ISD also gathered data from all the Facebook and Instagram accounts in the dataset from 1 January 2020 to 3 April 2023. Metrics for follower numbers and interaction rates were analysed using CrowdTangle. Account creation dates (or in the case of Instagram, the date of the first activity on the account) were manually recorded and volume of posts over time were analysed using our analytical software. Content was analysed using keyword lists created for each narrative and measuring their popularity over the time period.
- **Gab**: Follower numbers, interactions and account creation dates were recorded manually, and a qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify topics and trends (on posts up until 30 March 2023).
- **TikTok**: Follower numbers, interactions and account creation dates were manually recorded, and qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify topics and trends found in the content posted between 1 February 2023 and 3 April 2023.
- **Gettr**: Follower numbers, interactions and account creation dates were manually recorded. To analyse the content posted by the accounts, all publicly accessible data was collected (up to a maximum of 500 posts per account) that was posted between July 2021 (when the earliest account was created) and 20 February 2023 (the date of data collection). These posts were then analysed using the keywords list developed to examine each narrative and further analysis was conducted on a sample of these posts.
- **Alternative video platforms**: BitChute, Odysee and Rumble were analysed together as "alternative video platforms". Follower numbers, interactions and account creation dates were manually recorded. All videos published on these platforms by relevant accounts between

1 January 2020 - 3 February 2023 (the data of data collection) were catalogued. The titles of these videos were analysed using the keywords list developed to examine each topic and further analysis was then conducted on a subset of all content collected from the alternative video platforms.

- **Donation analysis**: Searches were conducted on each entity in the mis- and disinformation ecosystem to discover whether they were using online platforms to raise money. A mix of methods was used, including searching for mentions of "fund", "funds", "fundraiser", "donate" or "donation" or searching for mentions of specific platforms and mechanisms such as PayPal. Websites associated with each entity were also searched for signs of collecting donations and the source code was analysed to identify software and other mechanisms being used.

2. **Topic analysis**
- During the ethnographic monitoring phase of the research, nine topics were identified by analysts as being worthy of further investigation. These were: conspiracy, health, immigration, ethnonationalism and hate, Irish politics, climate, LGBTQ+ issues, Russia-Ukraine conflict and 5G.
- Keyword lists were built to extract conversations about each of the topics using our analytical software. The keyword lists were tested and refined twice to remove as many false positives from the results as possible.[62]
    i. **Conspiracy**: The keywords for the conspiracy narrative consisted of mentions of specific conspiracy theories, or entities, hashtags and individuals often associated with conspiratorial claims.
    ii. **Health**: Health keywords captured mentions of common terms associated with healthcare and wellness, including mentions associated with COVID-19, masks, testing, treatments, vaccines, monkeypox and RSV. Entities, hashtags and individuals commonly discussed within conversations about health were also included.
    iii. **Immigration**: These keywords included common phrases found in discussions about immigration, as well as hashtags, individuals,

locations and anti-immigrant tropes that have commonly been mentioned within such conversations.
    iv. **Ethnonationalism and hate**: These keywords mainly consisted of extremist slurs associated with Islamophobia, antisemitism and xenophobia, as well as hashtags commonly found in discussions of ethnonationalism.
    v. **Irish politics**: These keywords included the names and social media handles of all sitting members of the Dáil and the Seanad as well as mentions of political parties.
    vi. **Climate**: These keywords consisted of phrases and words commonly found in discussions about climate change, including phrases and hashtags associated with climate change denial and scepticism.
    vii. **Russia-Ukraine conflict**: These keywords consisted of mentions associated with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including regions, entities and individuals commonly found within these discussions. However, keywords included in this narrative also included more general keywords about both Russia and Ukraine and hits matching this narrative were therefore also identified before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.
    viii. **LGBTQ+**: These keywords included phrases and keywords found within discussions about the LGBTQ+ community, as well as slurs and anti-LGBTQ+ tropes.
    ix. **5G**: These keywords included mentions of 5G, electromagnetic and radio frequencies.
- The most engaged-with posts were extracted for each topic across Twitter (X) (by retweets), Facebook (by shares), Instagram (by likes), Telegram (by views) and YouTube (by views). The top domains and URLs shared in each narrative were also analysed, as were the most prolific users.[63] Analysis was then conducted by identifying trends across these different metrics.

Limitations
Keyword analysis is an imperfect science. Although efforts were made to remove false positives from the narrative datasets, there is still a possibility that a small

number of posts are not relevant to the topics in question. Equally, keyword analysis will not capture every mention of a particular narrative, due to the nature of how people discuss certain topics. ISD made every effort to create rich keyword lists that would capture the most obvious mentions of each narrative, but the numbers in this report for each narrative are likely an underestimate.

The method of extracting topics using keywords is limited to examining text posts only (including the titles of videos on YouTube, for example). This means that video, image and audio content is not included in the analysis. Therefore, the popularity of each narrative will be underestimated in ISD's analysis.

Data access on Facebook is limited to examining public pages and public groups. Personal profiles and private groups are therefore not included in the analysis.

The analysis in this report is based on accounts that were active during our data collection period. Accounts, profiles, groups and communities are frequently closed or removed by platforms, leaving their activities inaccessible to such analysis (for example, during 2020 ISD was monitoring a number of Irish QAnon groups which were subsequently removed from Facebook). This is part of a wider transparency issue in this research field and also points to the constantly changing nature of the online ecosystem. Therefore, while this research aims to capture as much activity as possible during the time period analysed, there is also plenty of data that has been lost and cannot be included.

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62. Keyword lists are available to select researchers upon request.

63. The data used in each analysis is available to select researchers upon request.

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