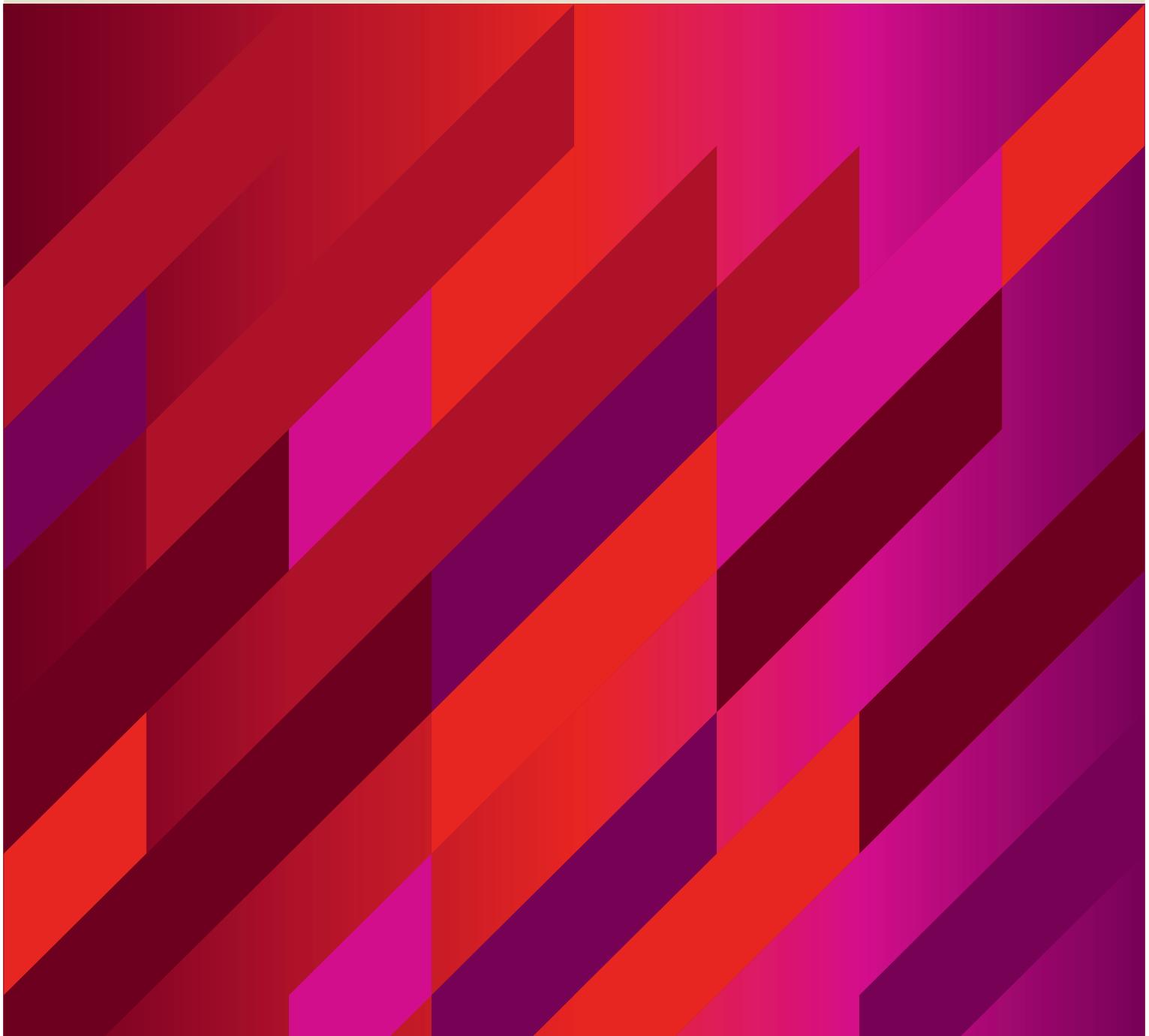




# Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales

FINAL REPORT

Macquarie University, Department of Security Studies and Criminology



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## Content Warning

**The content of this report necessarily engages with themes that are extreme and anti-social. Examples of extreme, hateful, and violent language are included in order to faithfully reproduce the data collected.**

Some racial and religious slurs as well as an obscenity have been redacted.

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# 1 Executive Summary

The project *Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales* (NSW) used the systematic mining and analysis of online data to generate evidence-based insights into online right-wing extremism (RWE) across the state. The project was conducted between July 2019 and February 2020 with data collection occurring from August to November 2019. The project addressed three key areas:

1. What is the nature of the online RWE environment in NSW?
2. How are themes and narratives framed in different online contexts in order to mobilise support?
3. What level of risk does the online RWE environment pose?

The research areas were framed as broad questions to facilitate wide exploratory research into the online RWE movement in NSW, a milieu that has been little studied. This breadth of scope was considered pertinent in the wake of the March 2019 mass casualty terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, by an attacker originating from NSW.

Academics from Macquarie University and Victoria University partnered to deliver this research. Expertise was provided by All Together Now. Funding was provided by the Department of Communities and Justice (NSW), Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Program.

## 1.1 Right Wing Extremism (RWE)

This report adopts the term RWE to denote communities and individuals committed to an extreme social, political, or ideological position that is pro-white identity (the ‘in-group’), and actively suspicious of non-white others (the ‘out-group’). It is characterised by individuals, groups, and ideologies that reject the principles of democracy for all and demand a commitment to dehumanising and/or hostile actions against out-groups. RWE can be used as an umbrella phrase which incorporates a collection of terms that have been adopted internationally to describe this diverse social movement, including the ‘far-right’, ‘alt-right’, ‘extreme-right’ etc. RWE communities actively misappropriate the

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language of conservative, right wing political philosophy to reject democratic norms and values.

## 1.2 Levels of Risk

The project identified two distinct yet connected levels of risk:

**Creeping Threat:** This shifting of the acceptable window of social and political discourse towards an extreme end point, described as a shifting of the Overton window, creates an insidious and creeping threat to political and social norms in Australia. This environment is characterised by narratives that challenge the fundamentals of pluralist liberal democracy through exclusivist appeals to race, ethnicity, nation, and gender. These are highly social environments with users expressing beliefs through appeals to critical thinking, a rejection of political correctness, the posing of alternative conspiracy theories, and the use of humour and satire that is designed to shock and offend.

**Risk of Violent Actors:** Within RWE communities there are individuals that advocate the use of violence as a tactic for expressing political grievances. RWE communities on more 'high risk' platforms engaged in increasingly radical and extreme rhetoric, including narratives supporting violence. Separating examples of bragging, irony, and fantasy from real capability and intent is problematic. This makes identifying potential violent actors from within these communities by their posts alone difficult.

## 1.3 Australian and American Narratives

RWE communities in NSW have a high interest in real world issues and events occurring in America and Australia. Hashtags are used on social media to draw attention to, organise, and promote user content. Hashtag frequency analysis provides insights into popular narratives with #MAGA and #auspol occurring in the top five hashtags in posts by Twitter and Gab users. This finding highlights the prevalence of narratives focused on American and Australian real-world issues and events.

## 1.4 Online RWE Communities

NSW has a long history of RWE and has been the centre of issues that have contributed to and exacerbated the growth of these communities, for example the 2005 Cronulla Riots and the backlash following the 2014 Martin Place

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Siege. Most RWE groups that have formed over the past decade have done so in the state of Victoria. Many of these groups have chapters or associated groups in NSW and maintain an online presence. However, in NSW, online RWE communities predominantly consist of networks of socially connected individuals that engage and share content across diverse media platforms.

## 1.5 Classifications of Social Media Platforms

Online RWE communities are highly social spaces. We categorise social media platforms from low to high risk in relation to the strength of the echo chamber and level of platform moderation. Movement from low to high risk platforms exposes users to increasingly smaller communities with less access to different content/opinions reflecting the potential for an increasingly extremist social identity.

## 1.6 Themes and Frames

**White Identity Under Threat:** The theme of white identity under threat was observed in all RWE communities. This narrative unifies RWE communities throughout Australia, North America, and Europe. It provides a transnational focus and identity for otherwise complex, diverse, and fluid communities. This singular theme is expressed in multiple ways.

**Deligitimisation and Dehumanisation:** On low-risk platforms (such as Twitter), ‘Trumpism’ and ‘deep-state’ conspiracy theories (e.g. #QAnon) provide users with an opportunity to engage with content that references the defence of a ‘white identity under threat’ without violating platform moderation policies. On high-risk platforms (such as Gab) this theme is framed in far more explicit terms that consistently draw on anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and more. On the chan messaging boards these take on a stronger extremity of expression including a willingness to explore and speculate about the need for at times violent action.

## 1.7 Issues for Future Consideration

The project team acknowledge this research represents a first step in the creation of further targeted empirical research. Below represents some suggested areas of consideration that emerged from this report. These areas include both a focus on societal resilience and strength building capabilities as well as targeted risk reduction strategies.

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- Awareness raising for key stakeholders across different levels of government and civil society about the revolutionary and anti-social agenda of the RWE milieu.
  - Building awareness about the civic underpinnings of representative liberal democracy and the threat that RWE poses.
  - Expanding current CVE infrastructure provided by the NSW government to individuals and communities vulnerable to right wing extremism.
  - Right-wing extremism exists across urban, regional, and rural NSW, with local government being well positioned to deliver programs in some communities.
  - Upskilling front-line workers to recognise the risks associated with RWE; and providing pathways into CVE intervention programs for individuals identified as being at-risk.

## 2 Project Background

Right-wing extremism (RWE) generates challenges to the inclusive and cohesive foundations of Australian society (Dean, Bell, and Vakhitova 2016). NSW has repeatedly shown itself to be a highly resilient and socially cohesive society that can respond to acts of violent extremism with peace, cohesion, and multicultural unity (Droogan and Waldek 2015). A resilient society provides a practical example that is the most effective, credible, and robust counter narrative to all forms of violent extremism.

Despite this ongoing commitment, there are concerns that the online activities of right-wing extremists are generating and contributing to forms of intolerance that spread into the offline environment and that seek to undermine and destroy the fundamentals of Australian liberal participatory democracy (Peucker, Smith, and Iqbal 2018).

### 2.1 Terms and Definitions

In recent years, forms of social and political extremism that draw on right-wing political discourse but that reject and threaten the fundamentals of liberal democracy have emerged in various parts of the world ranging from the USA and Western Europe, to India, Brazil, and Australia. Consequently, the terminology used to describe contemporary RWE includes a bewildering variety of descriptors including 'far-right', 'alt-right', 'extreme-right', and more. This array of terms reflects a state of diversity and rapid evolution that is characteristic of this dynamic environment.

For the purposes of consistency, this report adopts ASIO's use of the terms 'right-wing extremism' and 'extreme right-wing' (Burgess 2020). This term, RWE, is used here to denote communities and individuals committed to an extreme social, political, or ideological position that is pro-white identity (forming the 'in-group') and actively suspicious of non-white others (forming the 'out-group'). It is characterised by individuals, groups, and ideologies that reject the principles of democracy for all and demand a commitment to dehumanising and/or hostile actions against out-groups. It may refer to non-state individuals or groups engaged in illegal and violent action, or to groups or individuals

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attempting to undermine the social and political fabric of NSW and Australia through less violent strategies.

Human social relationships often distinguish an in-group from an out-group. Examples include rivalry between sports team 'x' versus team 'y', or competition between city 'x' versus city 'y', and so on. This is not normally problematic. Out-group othering becomes challenging to pluralistic and diverse societies and may lead to violence when out-groups are systematically demonised, vilified, and denied their equal status as human beings. Extremism, in this regard, is a polarised way of viewing the world that is intolerant of dissent (Berger 2018a). It is characterised by the dehumanisation of various groups including with those whom its disagrees, and the willingness to advocate for, and sometimes use, hostile action and violence to achieve stated goals.

The online RWE milieu is complex, dynamic, and fluid. It is a highly social environment that relies on a commitment to a shared narrative of white identity as vulnerable and under threat, and thus needing robust authoritarian defending from hostile 'others'. This narrative unifies RWE communities throughout Australia, North America, and Europe, providing a transnational focus and identity for an otherwise complex, diverse milieu (Figure 2.1). This singular narrative is expressed in multiple ways and in varying levels of extremeness among differing communities and across different social media platforms.



Figure 2.1: White identity under threat. Screenshot from Gab.

RWE communities and individuals actively appropriate the language of conservative, right-wing political philosophy to indicate how the survival of the in-group requires the negation of out-groups. It is important to stress, however, that RWE language and narratives routinely go far beyond conservative discourse to incorporate intolerance, hatred, illegal actions, and a rejection of liberal democratic norms and values (Dean, Bell, and Vakhitova 2016). Right-wing extremists adopt the language of conservative politics to appeal to and mobilise a broader audience towards aims that undermine the normative foundations of the Australian political system. RWE's are revolutionary rather than conservative in their approach. They agitate to undermine and destroy all political elites in Australia, including conservative politics and politicians.

## 2.2 The Research Project

This project used the systematic mining and analysis of online data to generate evidence-based insights into the online RWE environment in NSW. As an exploratory piece of work it aims to provide a base-line investigation into the

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state of RWE in NSW that can provide a better understanding of this landscape as well as point the way towards future research questions.

The research project reflects cooperation between social scientist academics and computer scientists from the Department of Security Studies and Criminology, Macquarie University, and the Institute for Sustainable Industries and Livable Cities, Victoria University. In addition expertise was provided by All Together Now, a non-for-profit NGO. Funding was provided by the Department of Communities and Justice, NSW, Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Program.

Significant assistance was provided by stakeholders in academia, government, and the community, too numerous to name here. However, the authors would like to sincerely thank all who shared their expertise and time throughout the project. In particular, we recognise the valuable assistance and contributions provided by our intern and our research assistant.

The project focused on five types of social media platforms ranging from larger, highly public, and well-moderated platforms to smaller, less well-moderated, independent platforms:

**Facebook:** 30 Australian right wing extremist group pages

**Twitter:** 37,422 tweets from 3,321 users identified as being in NSW

**Gab:** 1,357,391 toots from 23,836 accounts interacting with Australian seed accounts

**Reddit, 4chan, & 8chan:** archived message boards focused on NSW/Australian issues

The project employed a mixed-method approach outlined in the methodology chapter. All data was aggregated and de-identified in compliance with Macquarie University Human Research Ethics No: 5201955689213. Data analysis incorporated quantitative analytical tools and methods, and qualitative insights gained during the active monitoring of social media platforms by the project team. Results were triangulated in order to provide insight into the framing questions for the research.

# 3 Methodology

The data collection objective was to acquire a sample of conversations and images shared by RWE social media users located in NSW, Australia. The ethical protocols limited the capture of data to those social media networks that had a public RWE presence, did not forbid data collection as part of their terms of service, and were able to provide some indication of the location of the users.

## 3.1 Platform Specifics

Data collection and analysis occurred in four phases:

- Drawing on expert advice from All Together Now (ATN), we generated the initial sample of Twitter and Gab users, as well as identified posts on subreddits and 4chan and 8chan threads;
- We downloaded multiple data sources: posts from Gab, tweets from Twitter, posts from subreddits, and threads from 4chan and 8chan;
- We used the computer programming language Python to process and deidentify Gab and Twitter data; and
- We prepared deidentified data for expert qualitative analysis.

### 3.1.1 Facebook

Previous research examining online RWE activity globally and in Australia has focused on Facebook. Facebook remains the most popular social media platform globally with 2.5 billion monthly active users (Popularity 2020). It was not possible to collect data from Facebook without breaching their terms of service. This reflects Facebook's recent upgrade of data collection protocols (Graph API V4) following the 'data breach scandals' of Cambridge Analytica (Venturini and Rogers 2019).

The Facebook data used in this research was collected in 2019 by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. The groups included in this sample were identified

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by the original owners of the data. The data was then coded by region for a separate research project from which we have drawn from (Hutchinson 2019a). This data contains group posts only, with reactions and comments counted, but not exported. While this data tells us what the group admins were saying to the groups, it does not allow us to characterise the responses of the group members in any detail.

### **3.1.2 Twitter**

Twitter is one of the most widely used social media platforms (Perrin and Anderson 2019), averaging 330 million monthly users as of April 2019 of which 65% are between 35-65 years old. Twitter allows users to post messages of up to 280 characters (tweets) including images, videos, external links, and text. It describes itself as a place to find out ‘what’s happening in the world and what people are talking about right now’ (Twitter.com 2020a). Communication on the platform facilitates and encourages immediate and rapid bursts of communication. This type of hyper-personal communication rewards informal, playful, and attention-getting language (Gregory and Singh 2018). Those able to utilise this register effectively are rewarded by the social and technical norms of the platform with attention. Over the years Twitter has arguably become more of a broadcasting service as opposed to an environment where the cultivation of social relationships are prioritised as is the case for Facebook.

The Twitter data-sample represents the conversations of 3,321 accounts that engaged with the initial sample of 27 users that were associated with NSW. The sample generated a total of 37,442 tweets after cleaning.

### **3.1.3 Gab**

Gab is a relatively new social media platform, created in 2016 by Andrew Torba as an alternative to sites such as Twitter. It describes itself as ‘A social network that champions free speech, individual liberty and the free flow of information online. All are welcome.’ (Torba 2020), and one that welcomes users and content banned or suspended on other platforms. This agenda is exemplified by the platform’s minimal moderation policy focusing on a generalised forbidding of United States illegality rather than social norms (Gab Social 2020). Legal (in the United States) pornography and offensive content are permitted under the label Not-Safe-For-Work (NSFW).

This sense of being a platform for the forbidden, restricted, and banned is an important thematic narrative that runs through the Gab analysis conducted for this project. While Torba maintains that the platform is politically neutral, successive studies – including our own – have indicated a strong association

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with content associated with RWE (Zannettou et al. 2018; Reid McIlroy-Young 2019; Zhou et al. 2018).

In July 2019 Gab adopted a new platform similar to Mastodon<sup>1</sup> (Robertson 2019). The decision changed the functionality of Gab removing the upvoting and downvoting capacity that is featured in much of the previous (although still limited) academic analysis of the platform. The move necessitated a complete rewrite of the scraping code formulated by the project's data scientist to collect posts<sup>2</sup> from the platform.

The dataset reflects the collected interactions from 254 Gab users including conversations and reposts between c.a. 40,000 accounts. The bulk of these posts were posted in 2019. This time period incorporates the occurrences of a number of violent attacks conducted by right-wing extremists including the Mosque attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand (March 2019), the Poway Synagogue shooting in California, USA (April 2019), the El Paso, Texas Walmart shooting (August 2019) and the Haale, Germany Synagogue shooting (October 2019). Post activity from our data collection echos major real world violent extremist attacks, suggesting a correlation between these events, media coverage, and positive discussion of them on Gab.

### 3.1.4 Reddit, 4Chan, and 8Chan

Reddit is a pseudonymous social media platform for sharing, commenting, and voting on links and posted content. 4chan and 8chan, however, are completely anonymous message boards. These boards allow the unmoderated and anonymous posting, using threaded replies, of politically incorrect content.

4chan and 8chan have attracted users who discuss and/or celebrate content that is socially unacceptable or illegal. This content makes at least a segment of these platforms akin to market places of extremist ideologies and safe social spaces for global communities of young, angry and atomised users (Hoffman, Ware, and Shapiro 2020). Brenton Tarrant, the Christchurch attack perpetrator, used 8chan to post about his attack. He guided users on 8chan to his manifesto *The Great Replacement*. Both news of the attack and his manifesto found a receptive audience on this platform. Users on 8chan, then spread this hate-speech widely. Corporations, in response to these acts, refused to host necessary infrastructure for 8chan's continued operations (Wong 2019).

The posting of hate-speech and the reactions to it, occasioned significant commentary across the internet. With expert advice from ATN, we selected

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1. Mastodon is an open source, distributed, social media network. Because Mastodon was Open Source Software, the developers of Gab could reuse the code for any legal purpose – despite the protests of the communities of Mastodon.

2. Called toots in the relics of Mastodon code

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a number of RWE posts and threads discussing this topic on subreddits and boards. The focus of selection was aimed at understanding how the Christchurch Shootings were portrayed as a mobilising theme. We also wanted to understand how they have been used for propaganda and recruitment purposes by RWE individuals online.

Data was collected manually and preserved via screenshots through the months of June/July 2019. It was manually read by multiple members of the research team, with consideration being given to both textual narratives and imagery.

In the middle of the collection period, collection was hampered due to refusal of hosting and content delivery by Cloudflare (Wong 2019), which spurred 8chan's domain name registrar to also cease support for the site. 8chan failed to find a home, as its presence proved politically untenable for companies it was soliciting (Harwell 2019). After difficulties in rebranding and hosting, 8chan/8kun, finally found a public internet home using Russian hosting services (Levinson 2020). As a result of these hosting troubles, data collection of '8chan/8kun' ceased in August.

## 3.2 Sampling Techniques

Data collection started with 'snowball<sup>3</sup> sampling,' finding accounts related to seed accounts supplied by All Together Now (ATN) with sufficient connections to warrant our interest (Dusek, Yurova, and Ruppel 2015). We asked the platform Application Programming Interfaces<sup>4</sup> (APIs) to provide us all friends and followers of each of these accounts on both platforms. We then chose those *other* accounts which were part of the target accounts' social network as they were friended and followed in turn.

What follows is the technical discussion of how we created our dataset.

### 3.2.1 Gab Snowball

Snowball sampling for Gab required writing manual API interactions via Python's 'requests' library because the changes that Gab made to the Mastodon source code removed compatibility with extant Mastodon-Python libraries. Once queried, the following account metadata was harvested: followed, followed-by, number of posts, account creation date, and last posted date, as well as a sample of their most recent posts. Then the snowball code repeated this metadata collection for every account identified as followed or friended.

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3. This technique is called snowballing, because collected targets link to more targets that are then collected and so on, building up like a large snowball for a snowman (Sadler et al. 2010).

4. An Application Programming Interface is how a computer program allows other programs to interact with it.

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A list of accounts, computed metadata, and representative recent posts were written to a file. Unfortunately, Gab does not provide a mechanism for geographic filtering of accounts. Therefore, the most important diagnostic criteria for the next stage of snowballing was a measure of the level of ‘interaction’ the target account had with our initial account.

We were only interested in accounts which were both followed and followed by the initial targets supplied by ATN. This removed highly popular figures with the community but who did not follow anyone in the initial snowball. We then manually removed some of the more prolific American accounts for reasons of timeliness.

### **3.2.2 Twitter Snowball**

While we initially believed it would be possible to acquire data from the 17,000 users in our snowball, the cost of doing this on Twitter’s One-off Historical PowerTrack Service was prohibitive. The resulting snowballing rests on some pragmatic research decisions. It consists of a hand-curated set of all tweets from and to 27 accounts, where the tweeter’s (from or to) public account location identifies them as being inside the state of NSW.

Our initial snowball contained too many accounts. First, we eliminated any un-reciprocated follows, as many of our target users follow politicians and other popular accounts who do not follow our users back. We then programmatically removed any account which was suspended or otherwise problematic. Data collection started by using the Tweepy python library to interact with twitter’s developer portal to find friends and followers of our target accounts in an area roughly constrained to NSW. Friends, follows, and reply accounts were collected, and saved to an intermediate database. A weighted calculation of activity was applied to the significantly higher number of Twitter accounts, weighing their following of a target five times as much as the target following them. From this list of 17,000 accounts, we manually selected 27 to get all tweets to and from them, in addition to retweets and quoted tweets.

This Twitter Snowball analysis provided more than sufficient accounts to accomplish our specific investigational goals – allowing us to perform postdictive hypothesis generation which allows us to characterise and describe what we have seen. An opportunity exists to use the Twitter Enterprise API to engage in comprehensive sampling to test predictive hypotheses on RWE in NSW.

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### 3.3 Automated Data collection

Data was collected following all platform's Terms of Service, using authenticated APIs for Gab and Twitter's bulk-data collection.

#### 3.3.1 Gab via Mastodon APIs

Gab's migration to the Mastodon codebase in July 2019 required re-writing custom data collection software from scratch to interact with the novel hybrid Gab-Mastodon platform: no existing tools or libraries were able to provide means of capturing this data. The download of 1,357,391 'Gabs' (posts), from 23,836 accounts interested in and interacting with our seed Australian users took more than three months of continuous operation. This custom code allowed us to anonymise our data before collection, as per our ethics requirements.

We had to code our interactions with Gab's API manually because the Python libraries for interacting with Mastodon servers do not function on Gab. With these limitations in mind, we proceeded to download via Gab's API all posts of those users who were in our original dataset from ATN plus all users who matched our snowball criteria: sufficient mutual engagement with the initial cohort of target accounts with minor manual filtering for those extremely active accounts claiming that they were from the United States. We also downloaded all posts that were ancestors or descendants in conversational reply or repost 'conversations'. We also downloaded all images embedded in these posts so we could perform an engagement analysis on the images. Downloading started on 21 October 2019 and completed on 15 December 2019. Once downloaded, data was cleaned and deidentified by computer, ready for qualitative analysis by humans.

#### 3.3.2 Twitter's One-time Historical PowerTrack

For Twitter data collection, we used their 'One-time Historical PowerTrack jobs' service. This one-time PowerTrack allows us to submit a single search query with 'premium operators' for a specific duration in order to collect tweet histories and both sides of conversations:

Historical PowerTrack (HPT) is built to deliver Tweets at scale using a batch, Job-based design. If you are purchasing a one-time job, you will have to follow a simple process of developing a date range and set of filtering rules, and then downloading the job using one of our recommended processes. Twitter also offers a subscription-based option for those individuals who might want to access more than a single job. (Twitter.com 2020b)

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We submitted the query: ‘profile\_country:au (from: <username> OR to:<username> OR ... )’ involving the 27 most influential users identified in our snowball to Twitter’s Historical PowerTrack service, after going through the stringent Twitter ethics review process. From this we purchased 300,000 tweets from a period of 366 days originating from Australian-identified accounts, and narrowed that down to 37,442 tweets from 3,321 users positively identifying from being NSW. It is important to note here that because we were requesting all tweets to and from 27 individuals, their quote tweets, and their retweets, we did not perform a purely random sampling of conversations in NSW. This random sampling would be necessary for any statistical analysis of a population.

### **3.4 Computerised Analysis**

Both datasets, once cleaned via the scripts in the proceeding step, were analysed in the same way.

#### **3.4.1 Natural Language Processing**

Natural Language Processing (NLP) is the process of splitting up English sentences into individual words and word-stems using machine learning models to allow for the computational analysis of ‘Natural Language’. We used NLP to find the frequency of terms throughout the data we collected so that we could identify popular topics and when they were said (See appendix 9 for a visual illustration of an outcome.)

By summing these post-per-day counts over all accounts, we were able to generate activity per day charts using Python libraries<sup>5</sup>. A linear regression line was applied to the charts to provide a visual description of the rate of posting (Figures: 6.3a & 6.3b). Linear regression allows us to describe the trend we see in the data, but is not suitable for generalisation.

#### **3.4.2 URLs and Hashtags**

We computed frequency of URLs and hashtags. URL analysis was on the second-level domain, with no cleaning applied to deal with potentially duplicate domains (youtube.com andyoutu.be are different in our model). We excluded the remainder of the path and protocol to preserve anonymity. Hashtags were compelled to all-lowercase, though no stemming or lemmatisation was applied to them – this reflects the lived reality of the users where if a

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<sup>5</sup>. A library is a collection of source code.

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hashtag is different by virtue of having different letters, it exposes different conversations (footnote: #AusVotes is different from #AusVotes19 and is different from #AusVotes2019. However #ausvotes2019 shows the same posts as #AusVotes2019. We preserved this distinction in our analysis.)

One of the central questions posed to the analysis by the researchers was: ‘Where are the links to these sites going to?’ We generated tabular data by platform to show the specific frequency of posted domains. We counted the occurrence of posts of a domain, rather than the seen-engagement of links in possibly-popular posts, as we were looking for evidence of recruitment. Further statistical exploration in this area – comparing the writing and reading popularity of URLs and Hashtags is clearly desirable, though platform obfuscation does make getting good engagement statistics beyond likes and reposts extremely difficult.

### 3.4.3 Wordclouds and Lexical Dispersion Plots

Two visualisation techniques were selected for qualitative analysis: wordclouds generated with the Python wordcloud module for individual terms without temporal associations. To look at the usage of a term over time, we used Lexical Dispersion Plots:

‘... [W]e can also determine the location of a word in the text: how many words from the beginning it appears. This positional information can be displayed using a dispersion plot. Each stripe represents an instance of a word, and each row represents the entire text. (Bird, Klein, and Loper 2019)

By using this code as the basis for further improvement, we could see how individual terms were used over time. Significant terror attacks and political events were therefore evident in the text. See figures in Appendix 9 for some of the outputs in this process.

## 3.5 Limitations

Limitations exist in the methodology. Ethically, we only interacted with data the platform APIs exposed: we don’t know the rate of views for any given post, nor how many passive users read these posts. The account snowball targeting strategy is indicative: we seek tightly connected communities of users and extend out, rather than collecting all possible posts from a region and looking for users of interest thereby.

Due to technical limitations, we had to focus on conversations to and from the 27 users of interest. This resulted in *conversations*, but not full public tweet histories for the duration from 3,321 accounts. Because we only harvested

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conversations, some visualisations may suggest low activity in total, rather than low conversational activity.

From our snowball on Gab, we were able to find users interested in Australia, rather than Australian users. However, the data allows for the analysis of topics of repeated interest in these communities and to discuss how they think of themselves.

## 4 RWE in NSW and Australia

This chapter briefly reviews what is known about the origins, history, and character of RWE in Australia and in NSW to provide context for the findings outlined in this report.

### 4.1 The Origins and Development of RWE in NSW

This section is informed by a literature review of media sources, government reports, and academic research papers. Additional insight was sought from select academics, NGO members, law enforcement personnel, and former extremists with experience working in this space.

Until recently, Australian RWE movements have received little attention from academia or government, certainly when compared with their counterparts in Europe or North America. Scarcer still are research publications focusing on RWE movements in NSW. As a consequence, relatively little has been published about the development or current state of RWE movements in NSW.

Based on an extensive review of academic and non-academic literature, however, the following key NSW-specific takeaways can be noted:

**Long History in NSW:** What is today termed ‘RWE’ has a long history in Australia, going back over a century to the time of Federation. Throughout, RWE has been largely concentrated within Victoria and NSW, and specifically the cities of Melbourne and Sydney.

**NSW as Driver:** A series of key events have prompted the evolution and development of RWE in Australia. While some were international (e.g. WWI & WWII), almost all domestic events were NSW-based or caused: in particular, the 2005 Cronulla Riots, 2014 Martin Place Siege, and the actions of Brenton Tarrant the ChristChurch attacker (2019), who originated from Grafton.

**Fascism as a Constant:** International fascism and nazism have been highly influential on most forms of RWE throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although groups and individuals were likely to obscure their explicit fascism

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and anti-Semitism in the decades immediately post WWII, neo-nazism returned in the 1980's and 2000's.

**From Anti-Asian to Anti-Islamic:** The early 2000's saw a transition from predominantly anti-Asian immigration discourse to anti-Islamic sentiment. This began to occur following the 2001 9/11 attacks and subsequent Afghan and Second Gulf Wars, and then rapidly expanded with the rise of the Islamic State and, especially, the 2014 Martin Place Siege. However, anti-Asian sentiment remains present as has been seen in responses to the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Yu et al. 2020).

**Anti-Semitism:** Anti-Semitism remains a constant narrative through the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In popular culture this narrative remains both pervasive and invisible. On the higher-risk platforms identified in this report, however, anti-Semitism remains pervasive and always visible.

**The Current Environment:** Currently a proliferation of RWE groups are active in NSW that, while fluid and complex, share commonalities. Groups are relatively unstable and prone to fracturing; share a blended online and offline presence; have an internationally connected leadership; advocate cultural supremacist narratives that often obscure an underlying racial supremacy, and the admiration of fascism as a political alternative. Many groups also work towards the creation of revolutionary 'parallel' sleeper communities aimed at fermenting social instability and political revolution.

**Globalisation:** Since 2011, there has been an acceleration of violent RWE lone actor attacks globally, with each being virtually connected with, and mutually referencing, the others through the use of online manifestos and repeated mass-casualty attack methods, such as live streaming.

## 4.2 Historical RWE in Australia

The following provides an overview of the origins, trajectory, and current state of RWE movements in NSW as identified in the literature review.

### 4.2.1 Origins and Early Development

For over a century, Australian RWE movements have defined themselves in relation to a fundamental perception of geographic anxiety and sense of vulnerability, which can be traced back to the foundations of the first British colonies. Sensitive to this colonial past, geographic isolation, and fear of foreign invasion through war or immigration, it has repeatedly been observed that Australian

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culture has inherited an exclusivist perception of non-Australian identities (Hirst 2000; Henderson 2002; Fleming and Mondon 2018; Champion 2019a). Indeed, through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century fear of ‘external domination and internal contamination’ was common amongst Australians and reflected in Australian politics (Irving 1999). The implementation post-Federation of the White Australia Policy, for instance, demonstrated scepticism against racially non-‘white’ and culturally non-Australian people, and desire to prevent national racial infection from ‘inferior’ outsiders (Hirst 2000; Tavan 2005).

Against this cultural backdrop, the establishment of organised RWE groups emerged in the years following Germany’s defeat in 1918, and within the context of multiple economic downturns (Champion 2019a). In the wake of Australia’s first engagement in international war after Federation, and a parallel rising sense of militaristic and jingoistic nationalism against a defeated enemy, the Australian RWE emerged to ostensibly defend ‘real’ Australians from foreign ‘non-Australian’ identities (Champion 2019b).

The RWE group The Country, also referred to as the Old Guard, emerged in NSW at this time. It held a nativist xenophobic ideology that was deeply suspicious of any form of internationalism, particularly international Communism (Moore 1990; Champion 2019a, 2019b). It treated Australian politics and politicians with suspicion, feared any collusion with foreigners, and blamed the then NSW Premier for the economic difficulties of the times. In 1931, a small, militarised fraction of the Old Guard broke away to form an ideologically more rigid, fascist inspired group called the New Guard (Richard Evans 2008), which sought to develop international ties with fascist groups in Europe.

As Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler rose to power during the 1930’s and fascist sentiment emanated from Europe, a second wave of groups developed in NSW. Organisations such as the National Socialist German Workers Party (Perkins 1991; Moore 1990) pursued forms of fascism adapted to fit stereotyped Australian values. Following World War II, Australian RWE discourse returned to focus on a home-grown nationalist narrative, seeking to appeal to Australian rather than European cultural norms (Churchwell 2020). Through the mid-century, RWE groups expounded forms of anti-British sentiment, anti-Semitism, and the celebration of a stereotypical type of rugged ‘Australianess’ (Saleam 1999; Champion 2019a, 2019b). Groups such as the Australia First Movement and (later) the Australian League of Rights were prominent in NSW.

#### **4.2.2 The Proliferation of a RWE Milieu**

By the 1970’s and 80’s, with the gradual repeal of the White Australia Policy and the emergence of a political consensus celebrating the benefits of multiculturalism, NSW RWE movements emerged with clear neo-nazi agendas

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(Encel 1989; Poynting and Perry 2007). Rather than being explicit in proclaiming their fascist agenda, calls were made to protect Australian identity from increased immigration by Asians and Jews, if necessary through violence (Blainey 1984; Encel 1989). In 1984, members of the far-right neo-Nazi group National Action splintered to form the violent extremist group the Australian Nationalists Movement' (Harris-Hogan 2017). This movement was described by a 1991 Australian Government publication as a terrorist organisation that 'waged a guerrilla war against the public' (National Inquiry into Racist Violence in Australia 1991, 221).

Through the 1990's a proliferation of far-right political parties, social movements, vigilante groups, and gangs emerged across Australia, mostly adopting an anti-Asian immigration narrative. The plurality and diversity of these movements served to create a complex far-right milieu which included anti-immigration and racial nationalist groups; the Christian far-right movement; the political Confederate Action Party of Australia; and far-right street vigilante gangs.

### **4.2.3 From Anti-Asian to Anti-Islamic**

In 2005, a large-scale race riot in the NSW suburb of Cronulla revived and refocused the Australian RWE milieu. Against the backdrop of the 9/11 terror attacks in the USA, and subsequent Australian involvement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, this proved to be a crucial rallying point for violent white nationalism to refocus against Islam, rather than the earlier Asians.

There was a rapid growth in anti-Islamic extremist movements through NSW and beyond following the NSW Martin Place Siege in late 2014. Perpetrated by a self-styled Islamic State supporter using Islamic paraphernalia, it was immediately followed by the creation of what would become prominent new RWE movements, mostly in Victoria, and later spreading to NSW. These groups focused on anti-Islamic discourse but also proclaimed more general cultural or racial superiority ideals. In 2015, Reclaim Australia formed and quickly splintered into the United Patriots Front, which in turn splintered into the True Blue Crew in 2015, and the Lad's Society in 2017. At the same time, the older Australian Patriots Defence League, which was founded in 2009 in imitation of the English Defence League, splintered and gave rise to the Sons of Odin. This diverse and fluid RWE milieu was energised throughout 2015-2016 by the 'no mosques in Bendigo' protests in Victoria. While all of these groups subsequently opened chapters or projected a presence in NSW, their main base of support and operations appear to have largely remained in Victoria.

The global increase in white-supremacist rhetoric after 2015, with a concomitant increase in Australian RWE groups, culminated in the 2019 Christchurch Attack.

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The perpetrator of the attack, from Grafton, NSW, had engaged with RWE social media and posted on the United Patriots Front and True Blue Crew social media pages. He strategically used social media to record and disseminate both the attack and his manifesto, and to mobilise online communities to facilitate their spread online. The attack's impact was amplified through strategic social media use: the manifesto posted on multiple hard-to-remove locations was promoted through the live-streaming the attack using Facebook Live. Social media technology had enabled a far-right terrorist from NSW to attain the attention of the international community, spread and promote RWE ideology widely, and become a rallying symbol for RWE elements worldwide.

### **4.3 The Present**

Today the Australian RWE environment is rapidly changing. Formal groups are splintering and reforming under the leadership of key 'charismatic' personalities. Many networks and groups exist and are active both online and offline, drawing on members of the general population who hold anti-Islamic and anti-immigration sentiment, or have an attraction to catastrophising and conspiratorial thinking. These generally share a number of features including: a blended online and offline presence; an internationally connected leadership; and a focus on cultural supremacist narratives that often obscure an underlying racial supremacy. Some groups, such as Lad's Society, advocate for the creation of revolutionary parallel sleeper communities rather than the explicit promotion of violent or illegal activity (Sewell 2019).

Internationally, Australian RWE groups have shown the desire and ability to link with their compatriots abroad, particularly in North America (including Canada), the United Kingdom, and Europe. Connectivity has been established online and through limited travel. Key individuals also draw on wider international trends for inspiration and support, and a growing number of maverick conservative political entrepreneurs both at home and abroad such as the United States' President Donald Trump (Moran 2011; Fleming and Mondon 2018; Hutchinson 2019b).

Although remaining by definition exclusivist and anti-democratic, most Australian RWE groups are currently investing in cultural supremacist ideologies and narratives (i.e. 'Australia for Australians' or 'Muslims go home'), and de-emphasising public racial supremacist sentiments (i.e. 'whites are the master race') or the explicit posing of anti-democratic and authoritarian forms of government as a political alternative (i.e. 'fascism is the answer'). Two common ideological adaptations, for instance, are to appear politically-sensitive during rallies by removing neo-nazi paraphernalia and couching narratives within a more broadly socially 'acceptable' anti-Islamic discourse (Fleming

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and Mondon 2018). RWEs have, for instance, promoted their cause among online concerned citizen groups protesting the introduction of mosques into communities as a way of gradually introducing more racially and politically extremist messages to a large audience of potential supporters (Peucker, Smith, and Iqbal 2018).

Few, if any, groups explicitly and publicly advocate the use of violence against those considered part of the out-group such as Muslims, Jews or immigrants, but rather adopt a longer term opportunistic strategy. On the one hand, they advocate creating parallel societies able to infiltrate and hijack civic and democratic institutions to bring about eventual revolutionary change. On the other, they stay attuned to moments of political or social crisis that can be exploited in order to accelerate their agendas. In the words of Tom Sewell, founder of The Lad's Society:

We create the strongest possible organisation resembling Natural Order that we can achieve, we never stop developing this Order, eventually turning it into a self-reliant parallel society so that we succeed in our mission whether or not the collapse comes in our life time. For if the collapse does come, we have the best chance of creating Order through Chaos on a Macro scale for our people (Nation) as we would have already achieved it on a Micro scale within our Parallel Society. (Sewell 2019)

RWE groups are technologically savvy, exploiting the internet and the affordances of social media platforms to promote, connect, and recruit online (Dean, Bell, and Vakhitova 2016). While an online presence has remained central to most groups, there is often a sharp tension between the ease and utility of exploiting the online environment, and the perceived need for effective offline or real world action. In particular, groups such as The Lad's Society, True Blue Crew, and the Sons of Odin have stated online that they prefer offline action to online discussion, while noting the fundamentally blended nature of the two mediums. Group activity online sometimes requires dodging moderation or de-platforming attempts, making the building of a consistent and successful brand problematic (Wong 2019).

The COVID-19 global pandemic has generated significant levels of societal anxiety and stress, resulting in a rapid growth in the levels of disinformation, conspiratorial, and catastrophising content that has spread across all media (Garrett 2020). Although the COVID-19 pandemic occurred after the data collection phase of this project, anecdotal research suggests that RWE actors have been proactively exploiting opportunities afforded by the pandemic through the promotion of conspiracy theories, misinformation, and as a rallying cry for violence (Basit 2020). Conspiracy theories regularly play a critical role in the development of extremism through the formation of crisis narratives. These narratives offer individuals a framework to identify an enemy that can

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be held accountable and that requires decisive actions against so as to protect the believers from destruction (Berger 2018a).

# 5 The Online Right-Wing Extremism Milieu

Over the years many of the events that have contributed to the growth of the RWE milieu in Australia have taken place in NSW, for example the Cronulla Riots and the backlash following the Martin Place Siege. However, most of the groups that have emerged over the past decade have done so in the state of Victoria. Several of these groups have chapters or associated groups in NSW and maintain an online presence. However the online RWE milieu in NSW is more appropriately defined by the activities of networks of socially connected individuals that engage and share content across diverse media platforms.

## 5.1 Two Levels of Risk

The project identified two distinct yet connected levels of risk that emerge from the online RWE milieu and its associated social networks in NSW and Australia more widely.

1. A shifting of the acceptable window of social and political discourse towards an extreme end point, described here as a shifting of the Overton window<sup>1</sup>, that challenges the fundamentals of liberal democracy.
2. The risk of individuals adopting violent and illegal tactics in an attempt to bring about sudden social change.

### 5.1.1 Widening the Overton window

Much of the RWE milieu is not explicitly violent. However, it creates a growing enabling environment widening the Overton window on acceptable discourse and topics in order to undermine the legitimacy of participatory liberal democracy.

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1. ‘... [T]he Overton Window can both shift and expand, either increasing or shrinking the number of ideas politicians can support without unduly risking their electoral support.’ (Mackinac Center for Public Policy 2019)

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The highly social environment that characterises the RWE milieu employs what international scholars have described as intolerant liberalism, a rhetorical strategy that uses liberal principles such as freedom of speech to exclude and discredit ideas such as political correctness and groups such as Muslims, Asians, Women, Jews etc. (Peucker, Smith, and Iqbal 2018). The rich visual imagery is designed to shock and offend as much as to create laughter, popularity, and connection (Figure 5.1).



*Figure 5.1: RWE users commonly claim that white superiority is under threat by out-groups. Screenshot from Gab.*

Interesting parallels emerge between the themes involved in widening the Overton window for purposes of challenging participatory liberal democracy and the characteristics advocated by Paxton in his delineation on the nature of fascism. These include

[N]ostalgia for a purer, mythic, often rural past; cults of tradition and cultural regeneration, paramilitary groups; the delegitimising of political opponents and demonization of critics; the universalizing of some groups as authentically national, while dehumanizing all other groups; hostility to intellectualism and attacks on a free press; anti-modernism; fetishized patriarchal masculinity; and a distressed sense of victimhood and collective grievance (Churchwell 2020).

### **5.1.2 Use of Violence to Achieve an Ideological End**

Within the wider RWE milieu there are individuals and communities that advocate and/or support the use of violence as a tactic for expressing political grievance. RWE communities on more high risk platforms are engaged in increasingly radical and extreme rhetoric, including narratives supporting violence. Separating examples of bragging, irony, and fantasy from real capability and intent is problematic however. This makes identifying potential violent actors from within these communities by their posts alone difficult (Figure 5.2).

Up until now, there have been few examples of RWE groups in Australia or NSW explicitly advocating political violence or the adoption of terrorist tactics in order to achieve their goals. In a similar way to events in North America and

Europe, however, there have emerged maverick violent extremist individuals from within this wider milieu who have prepared for or undertaken violent acts. Acts such as mass shootings or attacks on government institutions have been justified by these individuals in their manifestos or online statements as ways to wake the wider population out of its apathy in the face of cultural threat, or as ways of precipitating wider social breakdown and facilitating political revolution.

Lone actor violent extremists have shown a similar, indeed more pronounced, international connectivity with peers in North America and Europe. Since 2011 there has been a concentration of lone actor RWE terrorist attacks globally, with each attacker virtually connected to and mutually referenced by the latter through their manifestos and, more recently, the online recording or live streaming of their attacks. Attackers have replicated mass-casualty attack methods and tactics from their predecessors. These include the posting of manifestos on multiple social media platforms; self-filming of attacks; live-feed versions of the attack distributed online; and the use of accompanying soundtracks (Cai and Landon 2019; Budryk 2019).

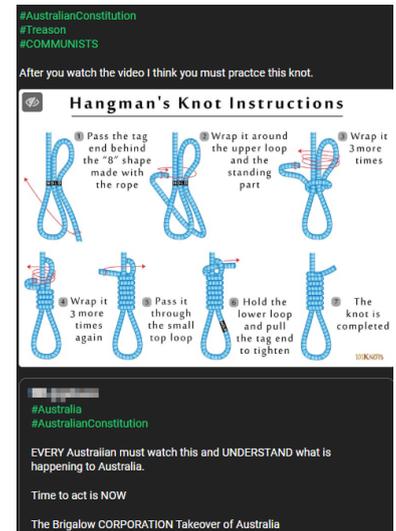


Figure 5.2: Calls for violence on Gab.

### 5.1.3 Networks and individuals

The online RWE milieu examined for this project is primarily defined by networks of individuals as opposed to named groups. As noted previously and by subject matter experts on the ground including ATN, RWE groups are operating across NSW. However, data on public group activity outside of Facebook, a platform that affords and rewards the creation of accounts associated with a group, cause, or event, was limited. Outside of Facebook, individuals across the RWE milieu seek out and engage with content from a range of different social media and news providers. These individuals are loosely connected through their activities of shared discourse and debate. Their interests and beliefs are platform agnostic and focus instead in a series of key narratives associated with notions of a white identity under threat while dodging moderation activity.

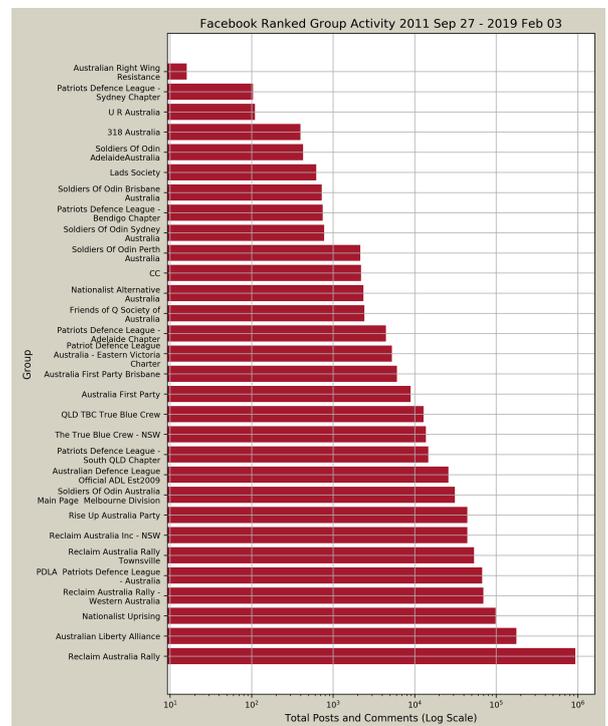


Figure 5.3: Log-scale count of all Facebook Group posts and comments from 2011 to 2019 (Hutchinson 2019a).

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Facebook data from 2011 to the beginning of 2019 illustrates an enduring level of activity of 30 Australian RWE group pages. NSW focused groups include Reclaim Australia NSW (4<sup>th</sup> most active), True Blue Crew NSW (17<sup>th</sup> most active) and Sons of Odin Sydney (at 23<sup>rd</sup>), although national Australian-wide group pages make up the two most active accounts over the time period (Figure 5.3).

Activity on these group accounts declined in 2018, likely due to increased platform moderation. However by 2019 activity was again increasing (Figure 5.4). The commitment to posting on Facebook, even with increasing moderation, reflects in part the global popularity of the platform and an enduring commitment to the values/norms expressed within these groups around nationalism, patriotism and anti-immigration (often expressed as racism and Islamophobia).

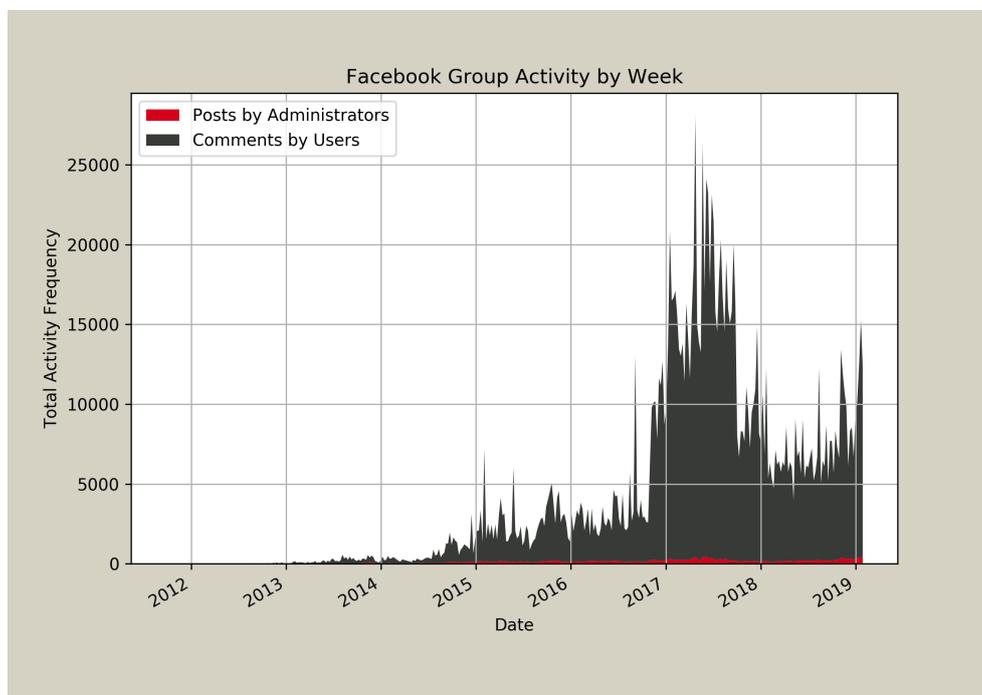


Figure 5.4: Facebook Group (Comment and Post) activity per week. (Hutchinson 2019a)

Online accounts linked to groups such as Reclaim Australia, True Blue Crew, and Lads Society were found across the social media platforms. However, the accounts were relatively inactive and appear less critical to users seeking engagement and connection to the online RWE milieu.

Words associated with RWE groups were also largely absent in the word frequency analysis carried out on the Twitter and Gab datasets (i.e. Odin was ranked 6000 in Gab). Groups were generally not discussed on Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan. Indeed, on Reddit there was evidence for significant confusion by users about what the group The Lads Society represented and its aims. While Gab affords users the option to join specific groups the options are broader categorisations such as 'Gardening', 'Guns of Gab', 'Manly Men of Gab'. Country

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specific groups do exist on Gab and at the time of the analysis Australia remains the most popular group with 13,100 followers. Yet even within this group there was limited evidence of discussion about RWE groups.

There was little evidence of specific group accounts being used to publicly organise online. These types of behaviours may be occurring in private conversations between connected individuals and may also be taking place in encrypted messaging apps, although investigation of these was outside the ethical framework of the project. Overall, the empirical data examined points to a vibrant yet often divergent online community of socially connected individuals loosely unified by a narrative of white identity under threat.

#### **5.1.4 Social Environments**

Most users on social media platforms appear to be seeking opportunities to engage and connect with others around shared interests, values, and norms, creating social connections, and ultimately social networks. The broader terrorism literature (Sageman 2008; Malthaner and Waldmann 2014) highlights the critical role played by social networks as a means of moving someone from supporting extreme ideologies to acting violently. This holds for both violent groups and lone actors, who tend to perceive themselves as acting on behalf of a broader support group.

Word frequency analysis on Twitter and Gab demonstrates the inherent sociality within the RWE milieu, with ‘people’, ‘like’, and ‘white’ emerging as key terms (Figures 5.5 & 5.6). On Twitter the most frequent word was actually an emoji of a angry face (🤨), followed by the terms ‘like’, ‘people’, and ‘good’ (2178, 2065, 2013 occurrences respectively). On Gab the terms ‘people’ and ‘like’ emerge as the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> most frequent words (127,120 and 117,149 occurrences respectively).

Within these inherently social networks, research consistently points to an uneven division of activity regardless of platform, with the majority of activity generated by a relatively small number of users. For example on Twitter, studies showed around 10% of users were responsible for over 90% of tweets (Perrin and Anderson 2019; Liang and Fu 2015). Examination of posting frequency on the Twitter and Gab datasets show the same sharply skewed (but standard) engagement curve, reflecting ‘normal’ social media microblogging services, where a minority of users produce the most content (Figures 6.3a & 6.3b in chapter 6).





# 6 The Classification of Social Media Platforms

The RWE extremist milieu uses multiple social media platforms that afford users different forms of interaction. As Conway notes in her assessment of best practice in conducting research into online violent extremism, ‘different social media platforms have different functionalities’, making it important to understand both how platform affordances shape and are exploited by violent extremists (Conway 2017).

The platforms under investigation in this project have been categorised from low through to high against two criteria: the strength of the echo chamber and the level of platform moderation. Movement from low to high risk platforms exposes users to increasingly smaller communities with less access to different content/opinions reflecting the potential for an increasingly extremist social identity (Figure 6.1)

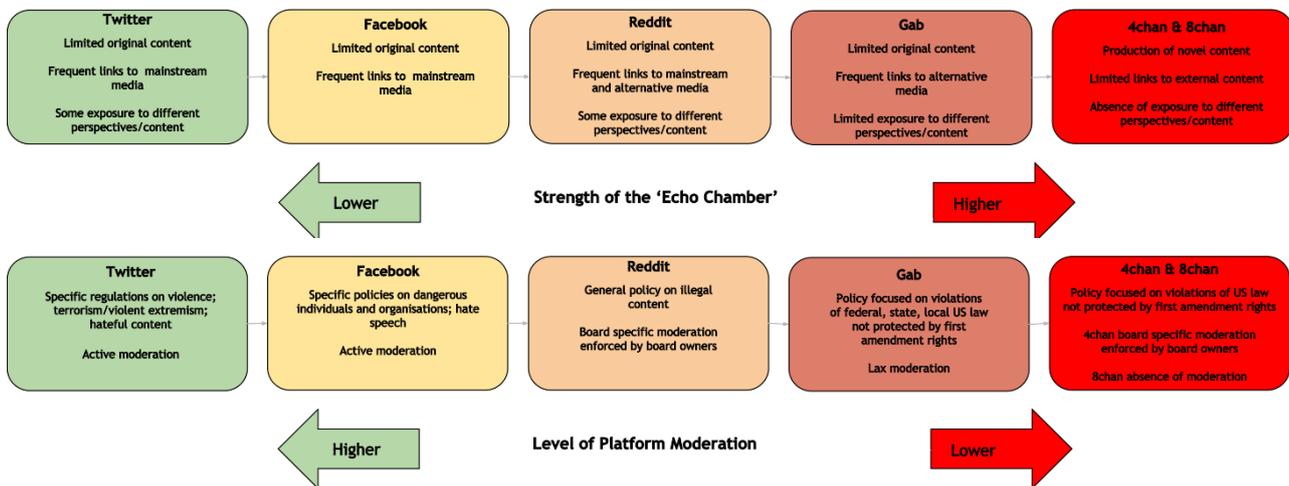


Figure 6.1: Risk Classifications of Platforms

## 6.1 Echo chambers

Echo chamber refers to a social network of like-minded individuals who generate and consume content that reinforces their beliefs and values (Lima et

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al. 2018; Quattrociochi, Scala, and Sunstein 2016). Within an echo chamber the use of specialised language and imagery found across the platforms further supports the sense of being part of a like-minded community where narratives will be supported and/or amplified.

Echo chambers limit the exposure of a user to alternative and/or opposing content. On Gab, 4chan, and 8chan, users interact in an environment where like-minded others engage in a contest of one-upmanship that can result in the sharing of increasingly extreme content and ideas (Gill et al. 2017; Jackson 2019). The themes of whiteness and free-speech highlight the homogeneity of the echo chamber and the resulting normalisation of extreme views within the network including those beliefs that generate a perception of persecution and victim-hood that demand redress (Jackson 2019). This is highlighted in the lexical dispersion plot 9.2 in the appendix.

Gab's recruitment functions to shift the Overton window for those who participate on the platform: with all discussions ending in an appeal to RWE themes, seemingly no matter the topic. This change in allowed/permitted discourse extends even to the captions and discussions around cat pictures and other normally depoliticised and inoffensive relaxing content. Those who continue participating may find significant peer pressure to change their language use to more socially acceptable (in the context of RWE) terms through lines and reposts, the standard social media reward mechanisms of engagement. Likewise on 4chan and 8chan the use of specialised jargon, jokes, and offensive tongue in cheek memes create and patrol borders against the out group. On these platforms it is relatively hard to interpret ongoing discussions if you are not part of (or interested in) the fast changing language and symbols used by the subculture.

It is important to note that even within echo chambers significant debate and discussions occur. On Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit discussions tend to be oppositional in nature where users with highly polarised beliefs essentially shout at each other. On Gab and the Chans, despite the use of highly offensive language, these exchanges are usually not inherently oppositional as far as the underlying ideology is concerned. Instead they often seek to inform and expand understandings and beliefs (Figure 6.2).

Twitter's algorithm and the presence/impact of paid advertising influences the selection of content on a users' timeline, contributing to the creation of echo chambers. In contrast to Gab however, users were regularly exposed to alternative and dissenting views. These exchanges often centre around the discussion of a specific issue or content (from another platform and/or media source) but quickly lapse into exchanges of insults, stereotypical narratives, and tropes. Despite this exposure, no evidence was found of users moderating or changing their beliefs or narrative. This absence is consistent with emerging

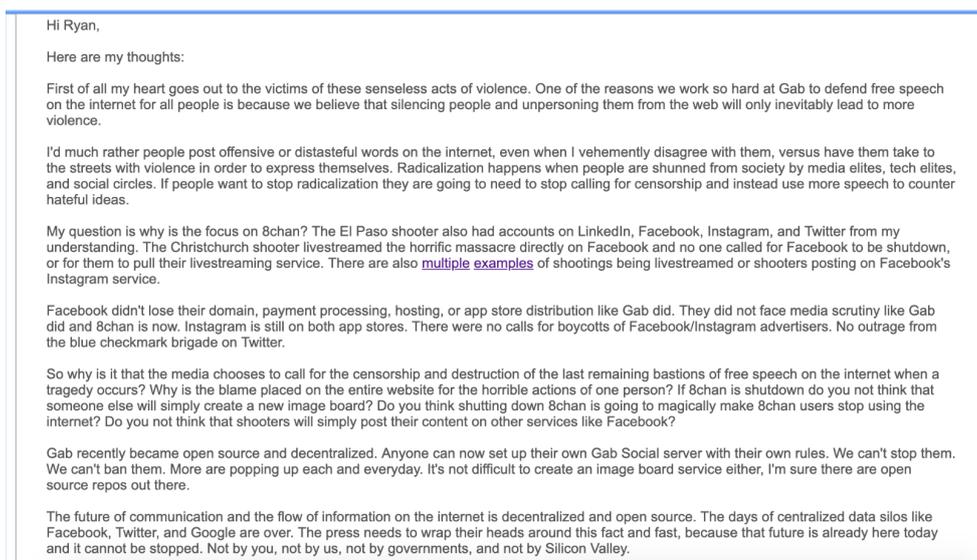


Figure 6.2: Non-Oppositional Exchanges of Information within the Gab Echo chamber

research (Yiu 2020; Bright et al. 2020) that suggests exposure to alternative and counter views both within and between echo chambers can actually reinforce values and beliefs as well as lead to an increasing polarisation of the echo chambers. As Bright et al. (2020) explain, '[T]he power of echo chambers may derive from the cognitive tools which they provide people to allow them to hold extreme viewpoints whilst being exposed to dissonant situations'.

## 6.2 Sources of Content

Many conversations in Twitter and Gab contain references to content from other platforms. Analysis of these external domains provides insights into the nature of the echo chambers present on a specific platform and cross-platform connectivity.

The sources of external content shared/discussed in different RWE milieus and the exposure of users to alternative perspectives impact on the strength of the echo chamber on different platforms. The video sharing platform YouTube emerged as a significant source of external content across all platforms. YouTube has been described as a pathway towards engagement with RWE with criticisms focusing on the plethora of RWE associated music and video channels as well as the platform's powerful algorithm (Conway, Scrivens, and McNair 2019). YouTube have sought to moderate content on some material, often by turning off the ability of users to comment on a specific video. However, this has arguably led to the conversation moving onto alternative platforms with lesser or non-existent moderation policies. The scope of this project did not extend to analysis of right-wing extremists interactions on YouTube.

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The most frequent external sources in the NSW Twitter dataset were from the mainstream media: *The Australian*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *abc.net.au*, and *The Daily Telegraph*. Although the exchanges around this content often involved offensive and hateful language, users were exposed to alternative and at times dissenting views. There was however little indication of shifts in the opinions of users within any such exchange, suggesting a strong cognitive bias among NSW Twitter users.

In contrast, external sources on Gab reflect an almost exclusive focus on alternative news media. The most frequent were *www.thegatewaypundit.com*, *www.bitchute.com*, *www.bribart.com*, *www.truepundit.com*, *www.newswars.com*, and *www.infowars.com*. Exchanges around content usually focused on reinforcing and/or amplifying the opinion or perspective under discussion. With little evidence of alternative perspectives being provided, the RWE milieu on Gab operates in a relatively strong echo chamber. The echo chamber phenomenon intensifies further on 4chan and 8chan/8kun. On these platforms there is a focus on the generation of novel content (often image based), and the creation of a 'safe space' in which users can engage in offensive and often increasingly extreme exchanges.

### 6.3 Level of Platform Moderation

Content moderation on each platform correlates with the extremity of expression of core RWE themes, with the voracity of expressions of hatred and violence increasing as the level of moderation declines. Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit actively enforce differing degrees of moderation on content that violates their specific platform policies on terrorism, violent extremism, and hate content. This results in a degree of caution among users and likely contributes to the absence of more extreme content and language.

In contrast, Gab, 4chan, and 8chan are extremely lax in regards to moderation, with it often limited to the vagaries of US copyright infringements and possibly extreme pornography. On these platforms there is a sense that the users take pride in the perceptions of these platforms as forbidden, restricted, edgy, or banned. The anonymity of the messaging boards reinforces this sense of freedom to post increasingly extreme and violent orientated content.

The ability of platforms to proactively and effectively moderate RWE content is challenging. While platforms have had reasonable success in the moderation of Islamic State related content, this is likely reflective of the group's designation by the USA as a terrorist organisation (Conway 2020). This contrasts heavily with the effective removal of content relating to other forms of violent extremism and hate speech where associations with specific groups are frequently lacking and the content is laden with humour, satire, and banal images/discourses. As Conway writes:

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Together, the memes, specialised jokes, and jargon dominating the online spaces of the extremist beliefs of these virtual communities serve as a constant stream of highly distilled ideological thought, reinforcing the extremist beliefs of these virtual communities, while also acting as a means of identity creation [...] However, taken separately, they are not interpretable as terrorist content. (2020)

Platform and content moderation is likely to remain at best reactionary given the limited number of designated RWE terrorist organisations, the proliferation of individual content producers and online influencers (as opposed to groups *per se*) skilled in the avoidance of de-platforming, and the lack of moderation by a number of providers. On Reddit, for example, despite active attempts to moderate the posts in the subreddit on the Christchurch attacker, users were still able to circumvent the community rules on hate speech and violence signaling out to other platforms such as 8chan where the lack of moderation permits this engagement. Likewise the ongoing resilience of 8chan to rebrand and remerge despite repeated attempts at prevention by a range of providers, highlights the ongoing complexity involved in moderating and managing the RWE online milieu.

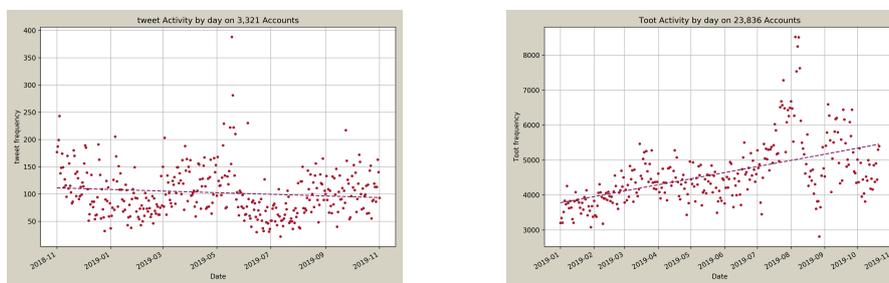
In addition, content moderation is also double-edged as the removal of offensive content does not necessarily infer a change in user belief and behaviour. Analysis indicates that users banned from Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit move to less moderated platforms such as Gab where they are exposed to far more risky and extreme content. It also appears that for many users suspension from a platform is seen as a badge of honour, contributing to a users' status seeking behaviour and sense of community within a network (Ganesh and Bright 2020).

The shift of content between platforms (intentional and organic), and the rapid real-time environment in which this happens, also increases the complexities of platform moderation and the sense that this process is likely to remain largely reactionary in nature. One example is the movement from 4chan to Twitter of the use of the triple parentheses: '((( <Name > )))'. These are placed around the name of a user to indicate Jewish ancestry, identity, or support (where the triple parentheses symbolises the 'echo' of Jewish destruction throughout history), for purposes of trolling communications, and to annoy and derail debates (Berger 2018b). This movement of content (memes and visual symbolism) across the risk spectrum of social media platforms is indicative of the creeping threat identified as one of the two key risks in this report. It reflects what has been described as a widening of the Overton window that results in topics once considered extreme and beyond normal consideration becoming accepted as part of mainstream discourse (Peeters 2020).

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## 6.4 Trends in Engagement

The RWE milieu on higher risk platforms is considerably smaller than those on lower risk platforms. In part, this reflects broader platform engagement and popularity. Over time, the project identified an increase in activity on platforms hosting higher risk communities. A steady decline in user activity was identified on Twitter, perhaps reflective of the platform’s growing enforcement regulations. In contrast, there was a steady increase in user activity on Gab (Figures 6.3a & 6.3b). While these reflect world events such as the Christchurch attack (March 2019) and Haale shooting (October 2019) the largest period of growth occurred during increased reporting on Gab in the mainstream media following the platform’s migration to a new codebase (July 2019). As user numbers increase on platforms with higher risk communities, messages, and content are amplified.



(a) Scatterplot and linear regression of daily activity on Twitter accounts located in New South Wales. (b) Scatterplot and linear regression of daily activity on Gab of users interacting with Australian users.

Figure 6.3: Activity over time on Twitter and Gab

### 6.4.1 Creating Community Narratives Through ‘Trending’ Topics

Like Twitter, Gab provides users with the ability to discover ‘popular’ (on the old version) and ‘trending’ (on the new version) topics, allowing new users to see the currently most-interacted-with posts on the network. Unlike platforms such as Twitter and YouTube where content presented to the viewer is influenced by other highly active content on the network and the actions of the user, the user on Gab does not need to seek out a specific discovery page, one that is not influenced by the posts of the user. Through these popular/trending/discovery pages, we find supporting evidence for the finding by Mathew et al. (2019) whereby a faction of new users appear to integrate into an inner-core of hate-centric networks very quickly. It appears users in the dataset are in this sense already receptive to some of the core values/norms associated with RWE, and those posts which make it onto popular/trending express an extremely clear and consistent worldview - alienating to anyone who does not already accept its cultural norms.

# 7 Key Narratives

The project identified a number of key mobilising narratives across the different platforms. Mobilising narratives are often used by groups and individuals for purposes of recruitment and engagement. These narratives are rarely static and provide endless opportunities for reframing and reshaping by diverse users. As the platforms examined become riskier the identified narratives are expressed in increasingly offensive and at times illegal ways. However, the consistency of the underpinning narratives across the platforms provides insights into the values and norms that shape the online RWE milieu.

## 7.1 Twitter and Gab

The online RWE milieu demonstrates a high interest in real world issues and events occurring in America and Australia. Hashtags are used on social media to draw attention to, organise, and promote user content. Hashtag frequency analysis provides insights into popular narratives with #MAGA and #auspol occurring in the top five hashtags in posts by Twitter and Gab users (Figures 7.1 & 7.2). This finding highlights the prevalence of narratives focused on American and Australian real- world issues and events.

### 7.1.1 Interest in NSW events

There was little indication in the data of any consistent interest in NSW specific issues. Word frequency analysis on all Twitter and Gab data revealed limited occurrences of words/names/groups associated with NSW, for example 'Gladys' (referencing the NSW Premier) ranked 1,375<sup>th</sup> out of a possible 21,720 words on Twitter and 6,587<sup>th</sup> out of a possible 505,221 words on Gab.

### 7.1.2 Trending: American Populist Politics

Reiterating analysis conducted by others (Berger 2018b; Zannettou et al. 2018), hashtag analysis of Twitter and Gab highlights the importance of American populist politics. On both platforms hashtags such as #MAGA (Make America







*Figure 7.3: One of the most popular images reshared by Twitter users in New South Wales. Note the centrality of the 'Game of Thrones' font. Downloaded from Twitter.*



*Figure 7.4: Image of Joe Biden tweeted by Donald Trump referencing allegations of corruption*

go one, we go all – a reference used by the Qanon community) and #thegreat-awakening.

Conspiracy theories are narratives that seek to explain events by identifying a group of actors working in secret to benefit themselves at the expense of others (Jackson 2017). #Qanon is an alt-right conspiracy theory that combines contemporary politics and racist tropes and has become a ‘totalising’ conspiracy theory that allows all world history to be explained in reference to the destructive elements of the ‘deep-state’ (Räikkä 2009). It centers around the belief that all American presidents between John F. Kennedy and Donald Trump have been working with ‘Cabal’, a group of global elites incorporating amongst others George Soros and the Rothschild family. It is deeply anti-elite and often alludes to the Cabal’s engagement in behaviours such as pedophilia

## Hashtags in Twitter tweets in 2019



Figure 7.5: Most frequent hashtags from Tweets.

and blood sacrifices (McQuade, Zuckerman, and LeJeune 2019). Conspiracy theories are difficult to refute because of their ‘self-sealing’ quality that ensures all conflicting information can be reframed within the worldview. This quality is further reinforced by the high levels of suspicion towards mainstream media sources and greater trust in alternative media sources (Forscher and Kteily 2020, themselves often proponents of conspiracy theories i.e. InfoWars,). This is particularly relevant to governments as conspiracy theories are predisposed to view all authorities, institutions, leaders, and communication as suspicious and likely to be withholding of truths (Wilson 2018). Initial research on Twitter use during COVID-19 highlights the spread of a range of conspiracy theories during the pandemic including those linked to global conspiracy theories such as Qanon (Ahmed et al. 2020).

Conspiracy theories represent a potential gateway into RWE beliefs and values. In his definition of extremism, Berger highlights the critical role often played by conspiracy theories as ‘crisis narratives’; frameworks that identify an enemy that can not only be held accountable for events but that requires decisive actions to protect the identity of believers (2018a). As a totalising conspiracy theory, Qanon (and others like it) provides believers with a master narrative that ‘proves’ how nothing happens by accident, nothing is as originally seems or is presented by authorities, and all events are connected (Jackson 2017). Qanon references in both users bios and inside individual tweets provide a symbolic referent that allows users to create bonds of identification amongst those who have accessed the truth. Its provides an opportunity to signal support for a range of beliefs associated with anti-elite, anti-democratic, racist and anti-

Semitic narratives that would likely result in moderation and/or suspension from Twitter (See Figure 7.6).

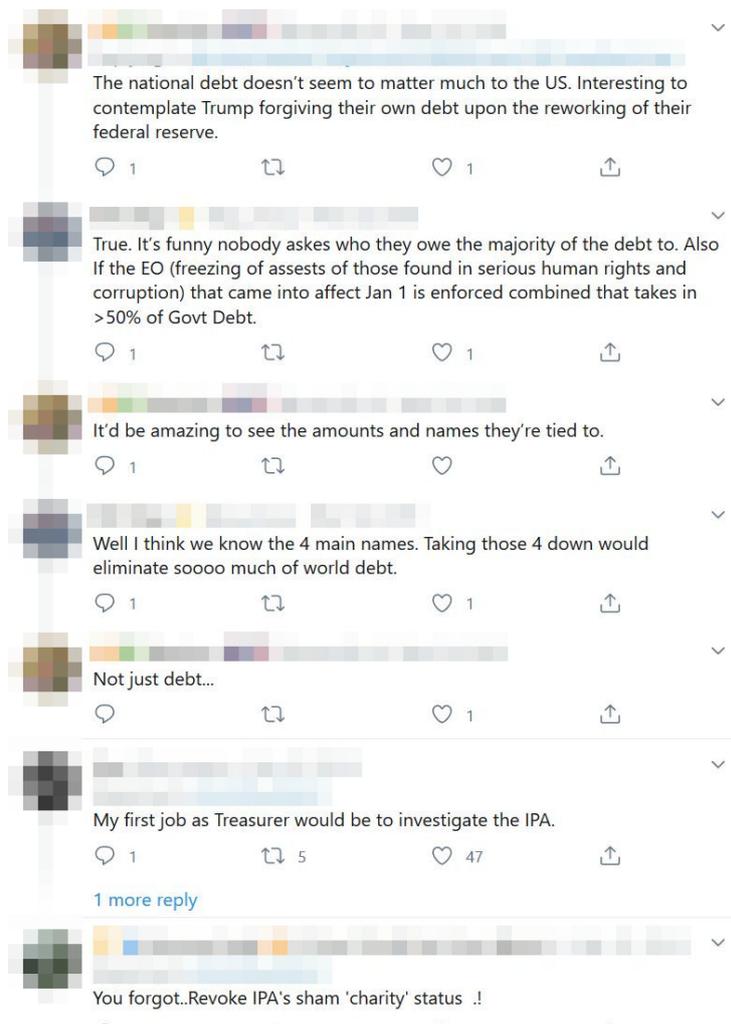


Figure 7.6: Twitter conversation demonstrating behaviour among users to avoid moderation

The popularity of Qanon in real-world Trump political rallies demonstrates the mainstreaming of content taken from the fringes of the internet, in this case 4chan/pol/board where Qanon was first referenced (Figure 7.7). Attendees often combine discourse and iconography linked to Trumpism and Qanon in their chants and use of iconography on t-shirts, patches, and signs. This process of normification through exposure in mainstream media and political discourse generates a risk of increased uptake and positive identification with the conspiracy. However emerging research that indicates exposure to conspiracy may at times lead to a critiquing of the underpinning ideas, highlights the need for caution and further research into the virality of conspiracy and the level of risk in poses across the RWE milieu (Peeters 2020).

White identity represented a core mobilising theme across content shared in the dataset. The word 'white' ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> (after people and like) at 89,241 occurrences. The focus on 'white' and 'whiteness' across Gab is closely associated with

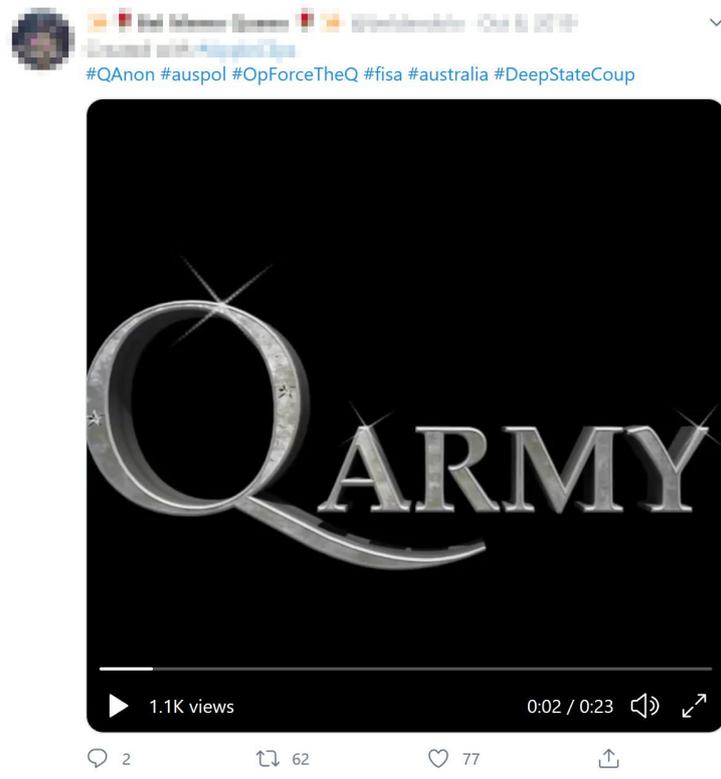


Figure 7.7: Qarmy - a reference to Qanon that is used on Twitter and at Trump political rallies to indicate support for Qanon and by extension (although not always intentional or understood) support for the anti-democratic values/beliefs at the centre of the movement.

narratives of nationalism and patriotism. As noted earlier these are often US centric with a strong focus on Trump.

On Twitter, Trump is a white feudal king, supported with themes of strength and approval from the popular series Game of Thrones. On Gab, however, there is more discussion around the validity of Trump's ability to deliver on his promises of a great white America

Words associated with nationalistic and patriotic narratives were compiled using lexical dispersion analysis (see Appendix 9). This technique examines the prevalence of the words in the 1,361,250 toots contained in the dataset (see figure 7.9). The top ranking word 'Trump' (68,477) supports the previous observation of the US-centric environment and the close association between narratives of white nationalism/patriotism and Trump. The next highest ranked words were 'white' (59,585), 'state' (35,108), 'nationalism' (30,876), and 'government' (25,827).

### 7.1.5 Whiteness: Elites in Danger

The theme of white/whiteness is underpinned by inherent tension between white identity cast as elite/valuable/superior and white identity as victim/threatened/in-



Figure 7.8: Another one of the most popular images, taken out of context, by Twitter users and shared heavily in NSW. Downloaded from Twitter.

danger. Presented as a narrative exemplifying superiority and destruction white/whiteness not only represents a core value within the community but affords users with an opportunity to encourage and support mobilisation within the required ‘war’ on civilisation.

### 7.1.6 Processes of Othering

There are a diverse range of narratives that can loosely be aggregated into a theme label of the ‘other’. These ‘others’ consist of individuals/entities that are diametrically opposed and actively seeking to destroy the values and norms central to Gab users. While anyone who disagrees with a specific user is likely to be framed as an ‘other’, two loose demarcations within the theme can be identified. The theme of ‘others’ are used to support beliefs associated with white pride, white genocide, and white victimhood. These types of narratives have been associated with radical and extreme rhetoric/beliefs.

The first subset incorporates content around ‘powerful-others’ (i.e. notional world elites). These are often linked to conspiracy theories that position Jews/intellectuals etc. as ‘evil’ powers behind governments, media, and the global economy.

The second subset of ‘others’, ‘powerless-others’, are loosely framed by narratives that incorporate a sense of the other as ‘polluting’ and ‘toxic’. They do not pose a specific and credible ideological threat towards the ‘in’ group. The worst they can do is an Antifa-style countermarch/terrorist attack which ‘benefits’ RWE by bringing media attention and sympathy into the larger news



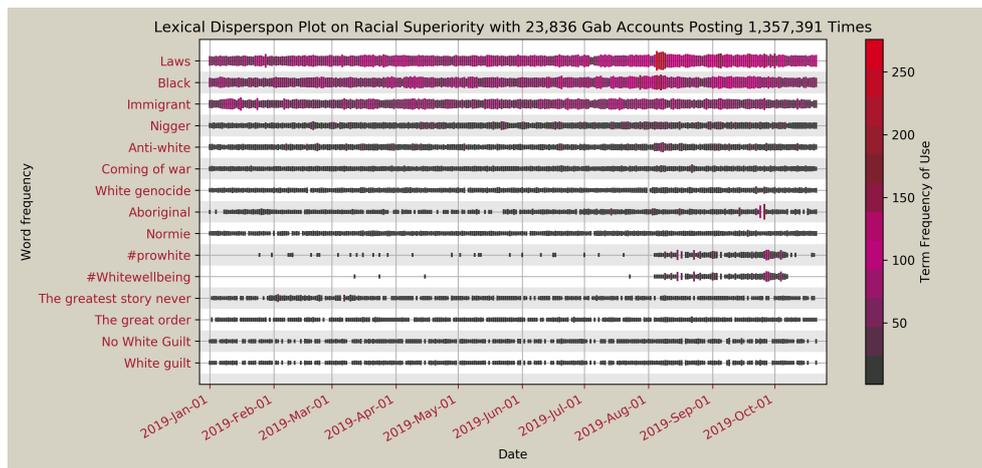


Figure 7.10: Popularity of Trump, White, and State within the Gab data sample

New Conversation at 2019-10-28T05:15:26.799Z:  
 Other User 1: I'm surprised the 6,000,000 hasn't risen with interest  
 ↳ over time  
 Original Post, This User: Deniers are charging them too much  
 ↳ [username-redacted]  
 End of Conversation

New Conversation at 2019-10-27T10:09:51.086Z:  
 Original Post, This User: Holocaust is literally the conspiracy theory.  
 ↳ They cannot prove that it happened.  
 End of Conversation

New Conversation at 2019-10-27T09:00:56.262Z:  
 Original Post, This User: It's evident that Jews and Europeans cannot  
 ↳ not coexist within the borders. We are widely divergent; Jews  
 ↳ invariably promote degenerate ideology which weakens the nation  
 ↳ and people. They had 3,000 years to change their attitude  
 End of Conversation

Figure 7.11: Anti-semitism on Gab

that are seen as ‘fake’ (see Trump conversation); and left-wing (snowflakes), as well as those from the ‘powerless-other’, Antifa, and normies (everyone else not engaging/supportive of the views expressed in a given conversation). The environment represents the worst echo of ‘fan fiction’ (Zuckerman 2019). The users are continuing an oral tradition, adding, augmenting, and annotating, but with no dissent or rejection of the core fiction (norms) tolerated. This finding supports research that found little evidence of ‘deliberative discussion’ with users preferring to broadcast content (Zhou et al. 2019).

### 7.1.8 Islamophobic, Anti-Asian, Racist, Homophobic, and Misogynist Sentiment

The all-word frequency on Gab ranks the words ‘Muslim’ 33<sup>rd</sup> (37,389) and ‘Islam’ 56<sup>th</sup> (28,945) with narratives often drawing on derogatory and racist

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New Conversation at 2019-04-21T21:43:51.000Z:  
Other User 1: Trump will 100% lose in 2020, and rightfully so. He will  
↳ lose because of people like me who see that he has not followed up  
↳ on any of his promises. He has lost a majority of his most  
↳ important supporters leading up to the 2016 election, and those  
↳ are the ones who made the memes and the momentum needed to get him  
↳ in. He turned out to either be an absolute moron, or simply a liar  
↳ who only cares about his k████ children and friends. ...

*Figure 7.12: Questioning Trumpism*

New Conversation at 2019-02-07T00:47:02.000Z:  
Original Post, This User: Joe Rogan is an Idiot [youtube link]  
Other User 1: Twitter is a turning into a echo chamber of TDS  
↳ sufferers. Good riddance  
Other User 2: Yes he is keep up the good work  
Other User 1: He is a jellyfish, and jack is a sob  
Other User 3: ha ha, he totally cucked out.  
Other User 4: ((( Joe Rogan )))  
Other User 5: Smoke some more weed Joe.  
Other User 6: And this is news to anyone? He's one of those  
↳ emasculated cucks who has to juice and learn a "martial art" to  
↳ feel like a man. The f████t wouldn't last 5 minutes in a real  
↳ world fight. F████ Joe Schmogan.  
...

*Figure 7.13: The race to the bottom in Gab conversations*

overtones. Lexical dispersion analysis on a list of Islamophobic related words outlines the consistency of anti-Islamic sentiment throughout the dataset. This is also a reactive dataset in relation to real world events with a spike in the words ‘Muslim’, ‘Islam’, ‘attack’, ‘terrorist’, and ‘kill’ around March 2019 correlating with the Christchurch terrorist attack.

In contrast to Twitter, anti-Islamic sentiment is assumed as a constant and unquestioned norm: discussion arises in specific relation to attacks or policy opposition, not mere denigration. The spike around the Christchurch attack shows a brief community focus before conversation returned to the ‘true’ elites. This supports findings that indicate anti-islamic themes are a populist trope that can generate consistently high engagement on the platform: a risk free marketing message for a user’s personal account (Peucker, Smith, and Iqbal 2018).

The ‘toxic, polluting, powerless-other’ varies from user to user: it varies by reactions to the news, political events, local happenings, or other existential concerns and proclivities. The other, whichever sub-group is targeted in this way, is described in the dataset as a waste of oxygen which should be expunged (or actively removed from a given location/nation state). These ‘others’ are

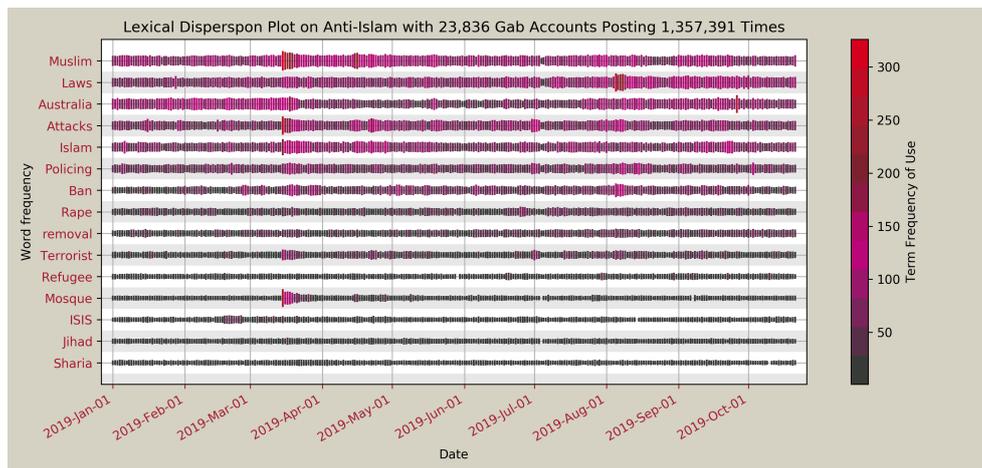


Figure 7.14: Anti-Islamic sentiment on Gab

framed as infiltrating white spaces in part by the inactivity of ‘normies’ (white people that remain outside of the Gab community). (see image)

On Gab the theme of ‘white identity under threat’ is framed in far more explicit terms that consistently draw on antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment, misogyny, and more. Lexical dispersion analysis highlights the prevalence of posts (term frequency use is 500) incorporating the words ‘Jew’, ‘Muslim’, ‘white’, and ‘Qanon’ (Figure 7.16). There was not a single day during the data collection period when these terms were not used by the RWE milieu on Gab. These frames afford users the opportunity to engage in discussions that frame these ‘others’ as either *powerless*: those that are ‘polluting’, and ‘disgusting’ but can be destroyed/removed (i.e. immigrants); or *powerful*: those that pose an existential threat due to the power they exert over democratic governments, media, and the global economy (i.e. Jews and politicians). Across the 4chan and 8chan messaging boards these same frames take on an even stronger extremity of expression including a willingness to explore and speculate about the need for (at times violent) action.

## 7.2 Reddit, 4chan & 8chan/8kun

This section provides a qualitative analysis of the message-board sites Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan, in particular their portrayal of the Christchurch attacker as a celebrity cause and icon. The Christchurch attack has been portrayed as a rallying cause, cited as an exemplary model for direct action against the out-group, and used to mobilise violent action. The perpetrator, Brenton Tarrant is positively represented as the paradigmatic white ‘Aryan hero’: young, virile, armed, and dangerous. He has been depicted as iconically ‘Australian’, dressed in stereotypical Crocodile Dundee attire, with an Akubra hat and Fosters beer. 4chan and 8chan users have symbolically used his name and image to mobilise and incite violent collective action (Figure 7.17). The section highlights how

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This User: [usernames removed] The Bataclan is never mentioned;  
↳ [explicit descriptions removed] How few of us know about and still  
↳ grieve for these precious young people...  
Other User 1: [usernames removed] Where in the hell was this and who  
↳ did it?  
This User: [usernames removed] Paris, France, 2015!!! It was ISIS!On  
↳ 13 November 2015, as part of a series of Islamic State of Iraq and  
↳ the Levant (ISIL) terrorist attacks across Paris, [long copied  
↳ description of attack from wikipedia removed]  
Other User 3: [usernames removed] WHY can't WE get any dedicated  
↳ warriors who would do the same thing at mosques and ``protests''  
↳ by illegals or large gatherings of queers? Seems to be what it's  
↳ going to take to send a message they will understand that we don't  
↳ want them here.  
This User: [usernames removed] Four short years later, and we have all  
↳ but forgotten the Bataclan, the murderous truck in the city of  
↳ Nice, and the beheading of the old priest in the north of France,  
↳ by a teenage MudSlime! Not to mention the French cop and his wife  
↳ tortured and killed in front of their three-year old toddler!Do we  
↳ have such a thing as a dedicated `warrior' left, or have they all  
↳ turned into soyboys????  
Other User 4: At this point I have no idea what it gonna take for  
↳ white people as a group get tired of this and arm themselves and  
↳ say ok enough it all stops NOW, where are the white men?  
↳ [usernames removed]  
This User: [usernames removed] Many White Men have had their essential  
↳ masculinity stripped from them by a carefully designed program  
↳ that has been in place for about 55 or so years. This is not going  
↳ to get fixed over-night, but it bloody well will get fixed!!!!  
Other User 5: [usernames removed] ONLY BY THE SHEDDING OF BLOOD  
↳ TOWARDS OUR MANLY ENEMIES WILL THIS EVER STOP.no other way will  
↳ END IT.  
This User: [usernames removed] What `manly' enemies??? Do you mean the  
↳ inbred low IQ MudSlimes or the feral savage n[REDACTED]s? Neither is  
↳ `manly' - if by manly you mean strength of character, coupled with  
↳ intelligence, motivation, creative genius, and sense of purpose.  
↳ That is solely reserved for White Men!

*Figure 7.15: Islamophobia on Gab, note the adoption of novel racial slurs.*

those engaged in the production and dissemination of these narratives move across platforms for purposes of recruitment and mobilisation.

### **7.2.1 A Spectrum of Anonymity and Ladder of Extremism**

A spectrum of anonymity and lack of moderation and censorship is displayed across the three platforms. Reddit provides a space for diverse debate about RWE issues, such as the trial of Christchurch attacker Benton Tarrant, with a wide array of ideological persuasions and perspectives represented. In contrast, discussions on 4chan and 8kun threads appear to be held almost entirely within a subculture of committed RWE individuals, although this echo chamber does not eliminate significant disagreement and argument among members. It is clear

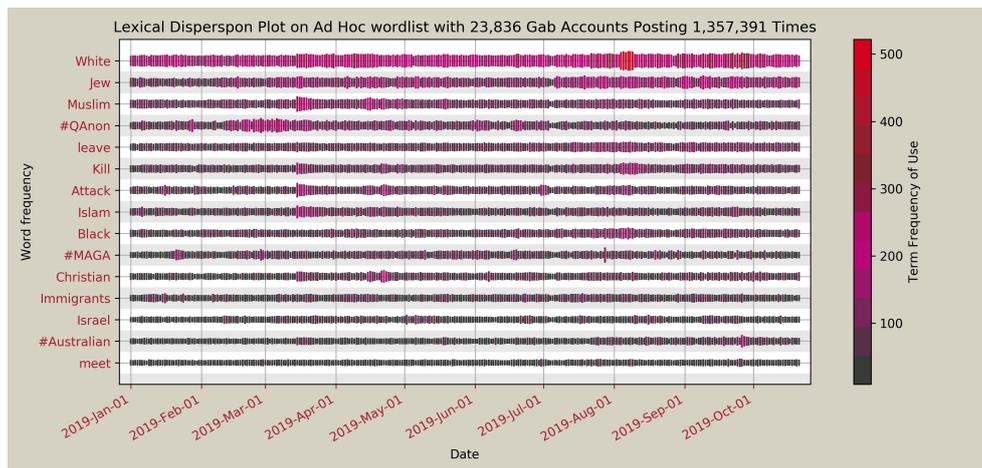


Figure 7.16: Measure of word frequency by day on Gab. More colourful lines indicate more daily activity.

that 4chan and 8kun demonstrate all the characteristics of ideological echo chambers, with a great deal of their content explicitly advocating violence, espousing conspiracy theories, insulting one another and any who disagrees, and posting toxic imagery celebrating RWE tropes and narratives.

As a result, the three platforms present a progression towards the use of higher risk language and imagery across the platforms, with Reddit at the base and 8kun at the top. For users, it is easy to consider how the movement from Reddit to some of the more extreme 4chan and 8kun discussion boards could produce a radicalising effect as they enter progressively less moderated and more extreme and explicitly violent and hate-filled communities.

## 7.2.2 The Christchurch Attack

On Friday the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, 2019, New South Welshman Brenton Tarrant conducted a mass shooting terror attack in two Islamic pray spaces in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, killing 51 people and wounding 49 others while at prayer. Before commencing, Tarrant posted links to a Facebook live-streaming of the attack, including a preferred soundtrack. At the same time, he posted a self-penned manifesto onto 8chan's '/pol' board, as well as to Twitter and other file sharing sites. He explicitly asked 8chan users to 'please do your part by spreading my message, making memes and shitposting as you usually do' (Martineau 2019).

In the 24 hours immediately following the shooting, Facebook detected and removed over 1.5 million uploads of the video, including over 800 different versions that had been hashed to avoid interception by detection software. At one point the number of uploads of the video to YouTube surpassed one-per-second. This conjunction between mass violence and social media marked a shift from online RWE individuals preserving and consuming content for

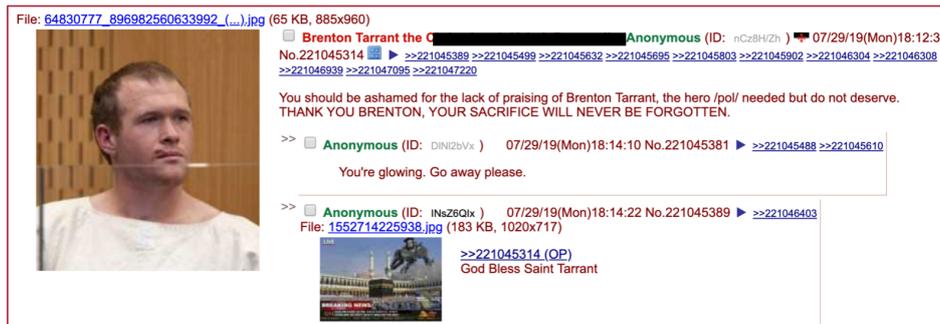


Figure 7.17: Selected archived images from 4chan and 8chan inciting violent action based on Tarrant's terrorism.

themselves, to the widespread aggressive sharing and use of the videos and manifestos in attempts to actively proselytise to non-RWE internet users.

The significance of the Christchurch shooting video and manifesto isn't (just) that it reached more mainstream internet users than perhaps any other such alt-right terrorist content to date. It's that it successfully moved an unknown number of users in online extremist communities from being passive consumers and conservators to become active propagandists—or worse. (Thomas 2020)

The Christchurch terrorist attack also brought the relatively under-moderated platforms Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan to increased notoriety by journalists, terrorism academics, and security services. In particular, attention was focused on the RWE communities using these sites to generate and promote RWE narratives, and as bases to preach, recruit, and mobilise among the wider public (a process referred to as delivering the 'red-pill'). Indeed, red pilling activities were identified in the dataset, highlighting how these platforms are used to generate and promote RWE narratives, and as bases to preach, recruit, and mobilise among the wider public.

### 7.2.3 Red-pilling on Reddit and 8chan

The posts on the selected subreddits demonstrate the richness of discussion of RWE themes between people of differing political persuasions, and appeared to often reflect genuine debate. Discussions related to the Christchurch attacks,

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for example, were largely structured as debate over the correct response to the incident, rather than calls to justify or glorify the attacks or underlying concepts such as white replacement theory. This included the appropriateness of Jacinda Ardern's refusal to publicly use Benton Tarrant's name, whether the refusal amounts to undue censorship, and whether Tarrant deserves full legal representation in court.

In general, Reddit users adopted Ardern's euphemistic approach and avoided using Tarrant's name in discussions. This is in stark contrast to RWE communities on the 4chan and 8chan who glorify Tarrant's name and image, regularly producing hagiographic writing and iconic quasi-religious imagery and icons around his cult (see Figure 7.18).



Figure 7.18: Saint Tarrant Meme from a 4chan message board

The analysis highlighted the exposure of users of Reddit to proactive red-pilling attempts by right-wing extremists who sought to expose them to RWE ideas and arguments, as well as directing them to less moderated sites such as 8chan for further, more radical, discussion.

This Reddit thread was titled: [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The discussion thread generated was exceptionally long and was explicitly referred to on 8chan (as then named) as a potential site for red-pilling, i.e. capturing audiences

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in debate with an aim of convincing them of the truthfulness of the RWE worldview and mobilising them to action. RWE themes discussed included the great replacement theory and its history, Nazi ideology, how transforming extreme-right ideas into mainstream ideas is the goal of the alt-right, and the aims and motives of Brenton Tarrant. However, over 600 comments in this thread were removed by Reddit's moderators, sometimes over 60 comments in a row. These were assumably where much of the red-pilling spoken about on 8chan was conducted.

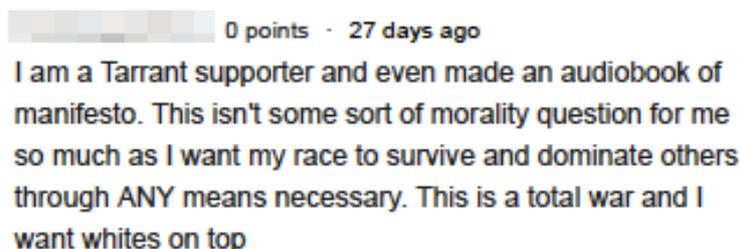
Highlighting the challenges faced by platform moderates, not all comments associated with red pilling have been removed. At one point a contributor asks if someone can explain how anyone can think killing innocent people who are praying could be justified (Figure 7.19). A user replies saying that they cannot do that without getting banned from Reddit, and that they should try to get an answer on a different platform. This user implied they could justify Tarrant's attack, but chooses not to do so on Reddit to avoid moderators expelling them from the platform. RWE Reddit users appear to be acutely aware of the boundaries of what moderators will tolerate, when these boundaries will be crossed, and make strategic choices to direct members to other, less regulated, platforms.



A screenshot of a Reddit comment and reply. The comment is from a user with a greyed-out profile picture, -1 points, and posted 27 days ago. The text of the comment is: "Can somebody please explain me in-depth the psychology of how anyone can think that going in an killing a bunch of muslims whom were just praying is right." The reply is from the same user, also with a greyed-out profile picture, and says: "Not without getting banned I can't. You'll have to try some other forum if you actually want to know."

*Figure 7.19: Avoiding moderators on Reddit*

Searching for the word 'Tarrant' in this thread shows that his name was used only three times among hundreds of posts. Twice his attack and mental stability were discussed, once a self-proclaimed Tarrant supporter left a comment (Figure 7.20). It is possible that the moderators missed this comment and it would normally have been deleted. It is the most extreme message remaining on the thread with the user claiming his society is in a 'total war' and he would like to see 'whites on top'.



A screenshot of a Reddit comment from a user with a greyed-out profile picture, 0 points, and posted 27 days ago. The text of the comment is: "I am a Tarrant supporter and even made an audiobook of manifesto. This isn't some sort of morality question for me so much as I want my race to survive and dominate others through ANY means necessary. This is a total war and I want whites on top"

*Figure 7.20: Sympathising with Tarrant on Reddit*

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## 7.2.4 Content Creation on 4chan

4chan and 8chan heavily utilise image-based memes (Holt, Freilich, and Chermak 2020), indeed many of the images and discourses found across the online RWE milieu trace their origins to these platforms. Memes create a subculture of users who get the in-joke and feel connected through shared humour, providing a test of in-group allegiance and discouraging others from entering into the subculture. Humorous or ambiguous memes can mask hate-filled and violent agendas behind a facade of humour and irony. The entertaining, edgy, and ‘humorous’ nature of memes can also lead a viewer ever deeper into a RWE culture, creating a permissive environment where RWE themes and narratives are normalised and come to be accepted and shared.

Analysis of a 4chan message board reveals the process of RWE online content generation within a highly pro-Tarrant echo chamber. The board generated 40 comments discussing the extent to which Brenton Tarrant should be considered a hero. Although most users on this board adhered to RWE ideology and the underlying validity of the great replacement thesis, this did not prevent significant discussion and argument arising among users. The greatest disagreements concerned the utility of Tarrant’s attack in furthering RWE goals, as well as conspiratorial perspectives about shadowy influences operating behind the scenes of the attack. These discussions may help to strengthen and entrench the perspectives and norms of the echo chamber on the platform.

The 4chan/pol thread begins with a tribute to Brenton Tarrant the man, a figure who it is argued provided the 4chan RWE sub-community with a galvanising example and symbol of leadership. Several memes then revere and worship Tarrant in quasi-religious terms (Baele, Brace, and Coan 2019), and one user refers to Tarrant’s terror attack as an ‘art’. However, this is quickly followed by critics expressing their opinion that Tarrant’s act has caused the opposite effect to that desired: New Zealand introduced laws to restrict gun ownership and liberals (or ‘cucks’) are on the ascendant.



*Figure 7.21: meme generated a 4chan message board*



Figure 7.22: Meme generated on a 4chan message board

### 7.2.5 The ‘Gamification’ of Terror

Almost half the memes produced on a 4chan message board conform to a ‘gamification’ of mass violence and terrorism trope (Figure 7.23). The gamification of RWE terror attacks is also frequent on 8chan. The way Tarrant carried out the attack, in particular his streaming the entire act from a helmet cam and addition of a desired soundtrack, looks and feels very similar to first-person shooter games and suggests his intent to create a game-like atmosphere.

This style of attack was copied by the RWE Poway Synagogue shooter in April 2019, and it is suspected that the August 2019 Texas shooter had a similar intention. The Texas shooter similarly posted a manifesto on 8chan immediately before his attack in which he stated his support for Brenton Tarrant (Dawson, Vassilakos, and Remy 2019). In the months following Tarrant’s attack several posts referred to beating his high score, referring to the number of casualties (Robert Evans 2019b).

### 7.2.6 Tarrant, and Australia, as RWE Icon

Although discussions around NSW events, groups, and individuals are limited across the dataset, there is a trend to portray the Christchurch attacks and their perpetrator as a celebrity cause and icon on 4chan and 8chan. The Christchurch attacks are regularly portrayed as a rallying cause, cited as an exemplary model



*Figure 7.23: Meme gamification of terrorist violence*

for direct action against the out-group, and their name used in an attempt to mobilise violent action.

Brenton Tarrant, and by extension Australia, is revered by some in these communities as a ‘saint’ who ‘sacrificed’ himself for a cause, and who’s name deserves respect and allegiance. The fact that he still lives does not hinder this process of martyrdom. A vast amount of imagery and iconography has been created and is circulated in meme form, as noted above, some of these memes draw from stereotypical Australian or Aryan tropes (See 7.17).

### **7.2.7 Thematic Disagreements Within the Echo Chamber**

Although a high level of consistency and repetition was displayed in the narratives and themes generated in response to the Christchurch terror attack and its perpetrator, a significant amount of disagreement and discord was also expressed among users. This example highlights the significant level of dissent, disagreement, and discord even within extremist echo chambers such as 8chan.

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He just a weakminded cuck that fell for the jewish tricks. M█████  
↳ are tools to f█████ up a country but isnt their fault. The real  
↳ menace are the jews behind all the conflicts in middle east  
↳ that ragaved and destroyed their homeland's and forced them  
↳ to immigrate, if you really want to take revenge and be a  
↳ real hero kill a member of one of these families:  
>Rothschild >Kuhn >Loeb >Lehman >Rockefeller >Sach >Warburg  
↳ >Lazard >Seaf >Goldman >Schiff >Morgan >Schroeder  
↳ >Bush >Harriman  
Jews are the real enemy of Mankind. That guy was a stupid low IQ  
↳ coward that atacked unarmed people.

*Figure 7.24: Anti-Semitic excerpt from 4chan's 'Christchurch thread'*

These points of difference may provide strategic opportunities for intervention and engagement.

The 4chan board ██████████  
██████████ provides examples. This board generated 59 replies. It starts with two pictures of Brenton Tarrant and the comment 'he gave his life to fight Islam, what did you do?' Despite the fact that Tarrant did not in fact die, the discussion then focussed on whether or not Tarrant's attack really happened, if it was a conspiracy, and if it was useful in furthering RWE goals.

One dominant debate centred around whether or not the Christchurch attack was a false flag operation conducted by The Mossad intelligence organisation. This conspiracy theory functioned to connect anti-Islamic and anti-Semitic themes. According to its supporters, Jews ('kikes') try to use Muslims ('muzzies') as a distraction, so that Jewish interests can strengthen their hegemony. Israeli Jews, it argues, sent Islamic migrants to Western countries, who then start to rape 'our women'. Muslims are portrayed as being 'as bad' as Jews, but also victims of some totalising global Zionist conspiracy. According to this narrative, Tarrant himself is seen as an unwitting and weak-minded ('cuck') accomplice to a grand Jewish conspiracy (Figure 7.24).

At one point a 4chan message board descends into argument about the utility of Tarrant's tactics. It is argued that Tarrant should have focused on 'making white kids' instead of killing Muslims. However, others defend Tarrant by saying it is much harder to have 51 white children, especially with white Western women, than it is to kill 51 non-whites. A subtle reference is made here against the status of emancipated women in Western nations.

## 8 Conclusion

The 15 months since the Christchurch terrorist attack have seen its attacker, and by extension the NSW and Australian RWE movement, come to international attention. This attack used social media to maximise its impact and directly communicate with an online audience of sympathisers and supporters. This project begins the process of mapping the contours of this movement in NSW, in particular the networks and narratives that make up a right-wing extremist milieu that stretches across borders throughout Australia and the world.

This online RWE milieu in NSW is both complex and dynamic. It is a highly social environment that provides connection for those sharing narratives focused on the theme of white identity under threat. The fluidity of this environment and its particular use of irony and humour allows for a myriad of frames to be applied to this shared narrative depending on the specificity of given platforms. However, at their core these narratives consistently seek to delegitimise liberal democratic government whilst dehumanising others, in particular Muslims, Asians, Jews, women, and liberals.

Despite being hateful and extreme, online RWE communities are spaces of sociability for users, where social networks are created and maintained around shared values and norms. They engender positive experiences for those involved in them, but with a revolutionary anti-government agenda hidden behind appeals to nationalism and Australian values. This milieu also conceals its extremist social and political perspective through the creation and consumption of online content that is often entertaining, provocative, and ironic. Despite this, it poses significant risks to the NSW body politic.

Two distinct yet connected levels of risk have been identified. The first consists of networks and content that challenge the fundamental principles of pluralistic liberal democracy. This shifting of the Overton window of acceptable social and political discourse to an extreme endpoint creates an insidious and creeping threat to political and social norms in Australia. The second is a smaller yet distinct risk of individuals advocating or using political violence as a tactic to achieve an ideological end.

For analytical purposes we categorised the social media platforms examined in the project. Platforms were categorised from low to high risk in relation to two criteria: the strength of the echo chamber, and the level of platform

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moderation. Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit are relatively low in contrast to Gab, 4chan, and 8chan/8kun where the absence of moderation have created a space for users to engage with highly extreme communities. The communities on higher risk platforms tend to be smaller than those on lower risk platforms, with some individuals moving from the lower towards the higher over time.

The complexity of the online environment and the short time frame within which the project was undertaken mean that the findings in the report represent a base-line for more targeted empirical research. Some priority areas for future research have been identified:

- Understanding the connections between online and offline activity.
- Examination of the use of YouTube and video content as a medium for engagement, recruitment, and mobilisation.
- Increased understanding around the effects of content moderation across different social media platforms and the impact these actions have across the broader online right-wing extremist milieu.
- The dynamics of the interdependencies between different forms of violent extremism (i.e. religious, right-wing, left-wing, and other) and the consequences for a whole of society response that incorporates all.

Some suggested areas of consideration for policy makers have emerged from the project findings. These areas include both a focus on societal resilience and strength building capabilities as well as targeted risk reduction strategies. They are:

- Awareness raising for key stakeholders across different levels of government and civil society about the revolutionary and anti-social agenda of right-wing extremism.
- Building awareness about the civic underpinnings of representative liberal democracy and the threat that right-wing extremism poses.
- Expanding current CVE infrastructure provided by the NSW government to individuals and communities vulnerable to right-wing extremism.
- Right-wing extremism exists across urban, regional, and rural NSW, with local government being well positioned to deliver programs in some communities.
- Upskilling front-line workers to recognise the risks associated with right-wing extremism; and providing pathways into CVE intervention programs for individuals identified as being at-risk.

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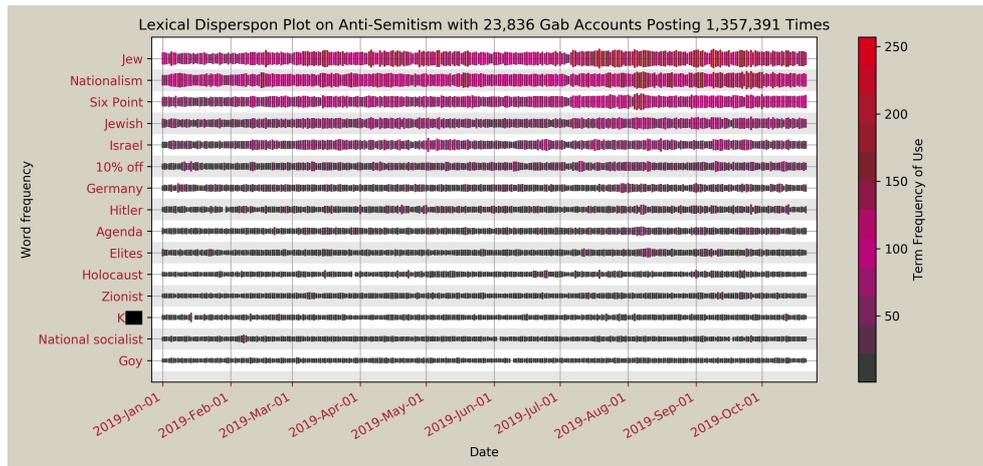
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## 9 Appendix: Lexical Dispersion Plots

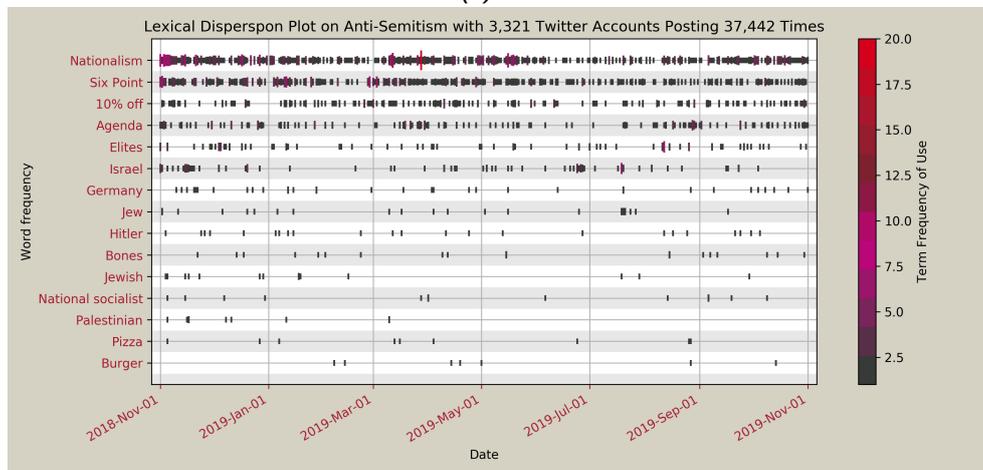
These lexical dispersion plots were generated through manual compilation of keywords, then applied to both datasets using the technique suggested in the NLTK book (Bird, Klein, and Loper 2019). Each colour scheme is normalised to the same range. It is critical when assessing plots against each other to consider:

- The difference in number of posts sampled.
- The highest frequency of occurrence of the term. Make sure to look at the number in the top right, as that will provide rough commensurability between graphs.
- These are not statistically generalisable graphs. They are descriptions of the accounts we observed and should only with the utmost caution be used to characterise communities on Gab and Twitter more generally.
- Words were searched for in their lemmatised and stemmed form. Special symbols were omitted. Only the presence or absence of words was checked, not their order.

## 9.1 Anti-Semitism



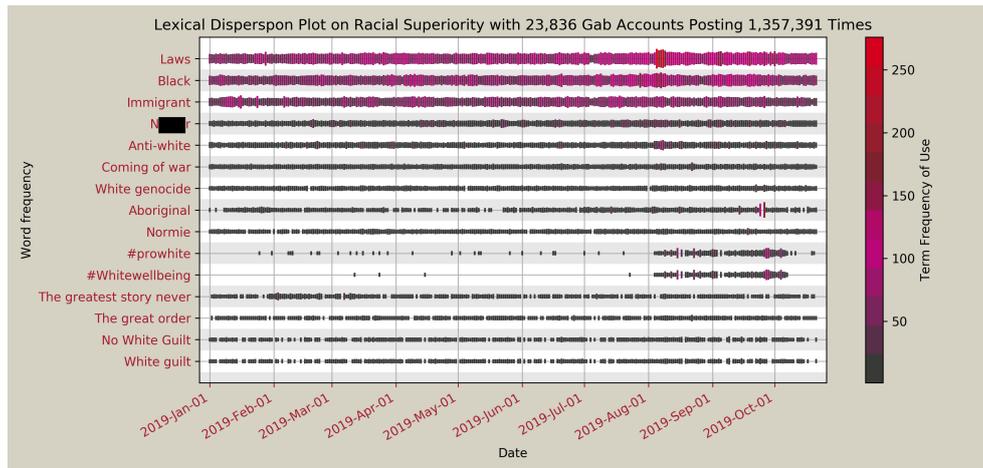
(a) Gab



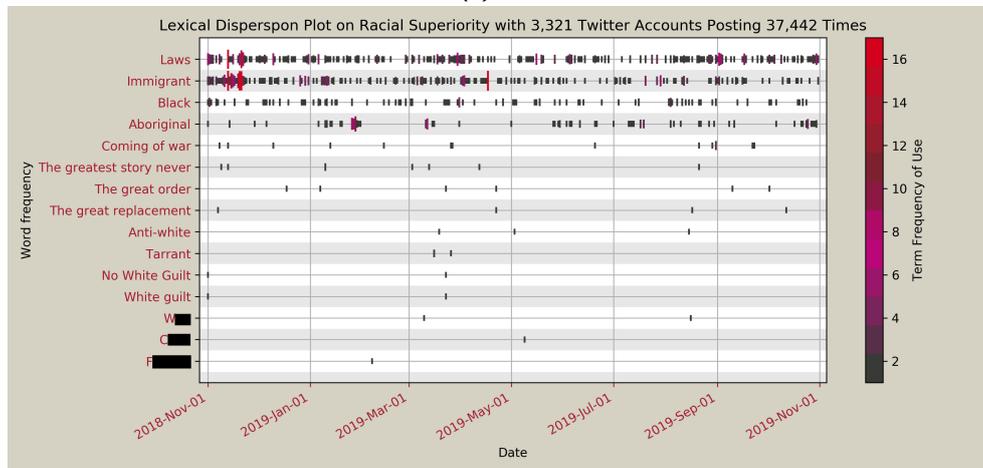
(b) Twitter

Figure 9.1: Lexical Dispersion Plots on: Anti-Semitism

## 9.2 Racial Superiority



(a) Gab



(b) Twitter

Figure 9.2: Lexical Dispersion Plots on: Racial Superiority

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## Conflicts of Interest

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