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Online Far Right Extremist and Conspiratorial Narratives During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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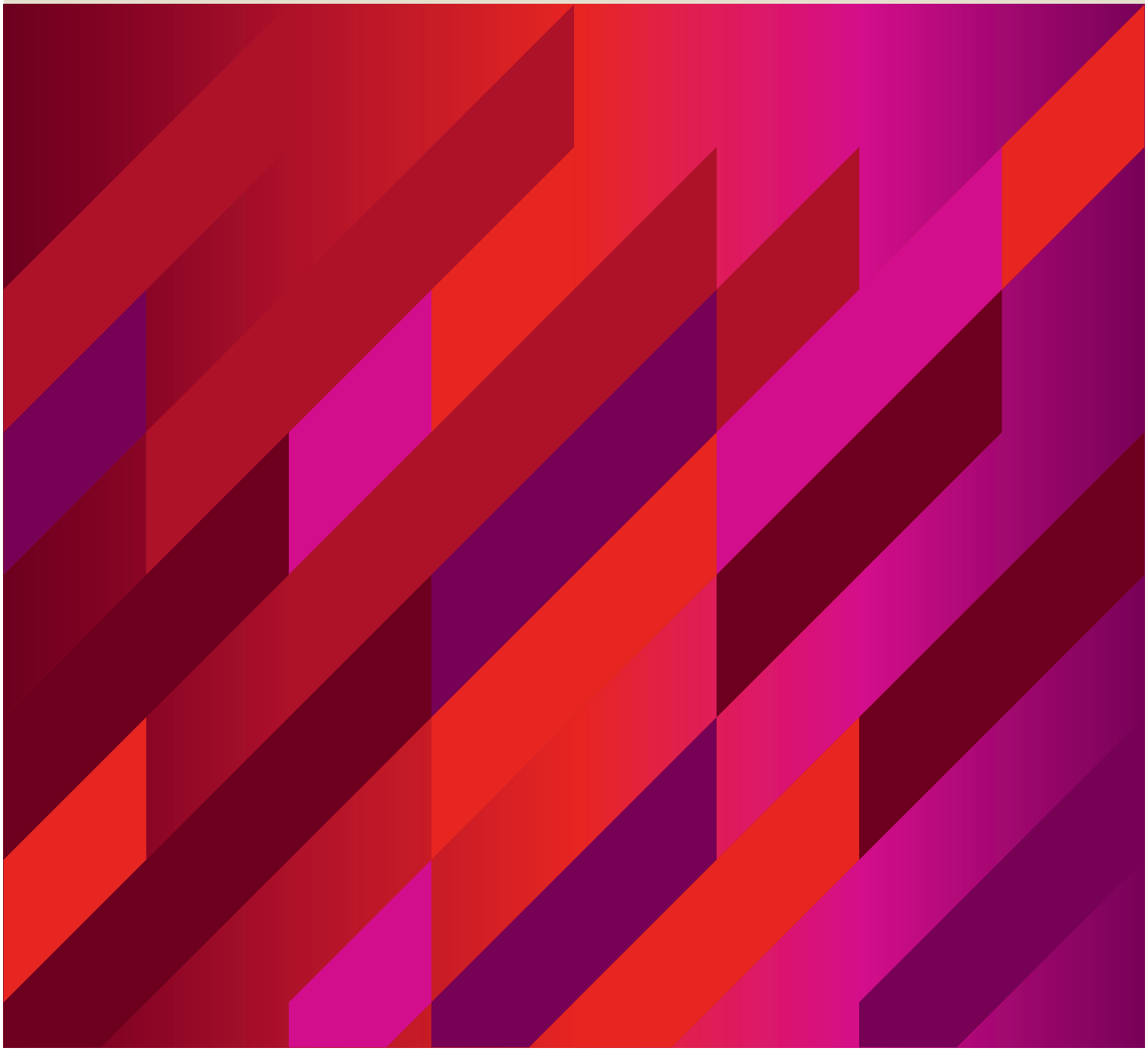
* The ordering of authors' names reflects a principle of rotation



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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.

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Executive Summary

The pandemic caused by the novel Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) presents a national and global crisis. Government public health responses have impacted on the social and behavioural norms that shape daily interactions in Australia. The pandemic has been accompanied by the global spread of false and misleading information including conspiratorial narratives, resulting in an online environment described as an 'infodemic'. The situation has presented far right extremists with a unique opportunity to capitalise on societal anxieties and align their narratives with wider public discourse to recruit and mobilise.

To better understand the impact of COVID-19 on Australian far right extremists, this report addressed three key questions.

- The creeping threat posed by far right extremist narratives in online Australian sentiment across a two-year time period from 8 January 2019 to 8 January 2021.
- How the COVID-19 pandemic and public health responses have been appropriated by far right extremists in Australia for purposes of recruitment, engagement, and mobilisation.
- The impact and effectiveness of social media moderation strategies on the presence and growth of far right extremists and conspiratorial narratives in the online environment.

Data sources The report draws on two data sets. The creeping threat posed by far right extremist and conspiratorial narratives on mainstream public sentiment was explored using YouTube and Twitter data. In total, 21 YouTube channels were selected, generating 13+million comments, and 1% of Australian tweets and retweets were collected generating 5.5+million tweets. To explore how far right extremists have appropriated COVID-19 online, screenshots from Telegram and Instagram channels were collected from groups, individuals, and personalities associated with far right extremist and militant anti-lockdown movements.

Key findings

Spreading extremist and conspiratorial narratives We identified a statistically significant increase in language associated with far right extremism over a two year period. While statistically significant this trend represents a tiny percentage of social media engagement in the online environment. The findings likely reflect social media moderation strategies and behaviours of users to avoid moderation.

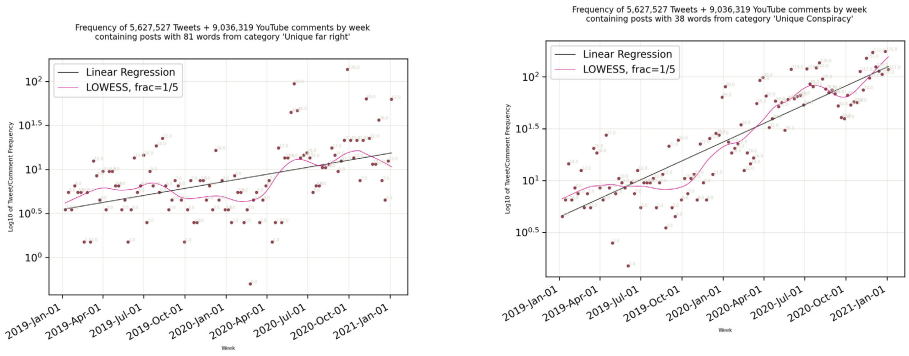


Figure A.: Charts showing the increase (on a logarithmic scale) in words associated with unique far right extremist and unique (non-COVID-19) conspiratorial content over time.

We also saw a statistically significant increase conspiratorial language. Our findings indicate conspiratorial language has become established and normalised in online Australian public sentiment. While still only a small part of online discourse, conspiratorial language has proven resilient and enduring.

Conspiracy theories provide simplistic answers to complex problems such as the current pandemic, and present experts and traditional systems of authority (including government) as malevolent and untrusted actors. Belief in a conspiracy theory is not a reliable indicator of an acceptance of far right extremism. However, COVID-19 has facilitated an increase in the entry of conspiratorial narratives into mainstream communications providing far right extremists with opportunities to engage new audiences.

Aligning messages with public concerns A growth in conspiratorial thinking during the pandemic has allowed far right extremists to access and mobilise novel audiences. A generalising conspiracy narrative has crystallised around people's experiences of the pandemic and associated government health orders. Highly flexible, this narrative is adopted by far right extremist and non-far right extremist communities, presenting opportunities for an alignment between far right extremist and popular public discourse. The COVID-19 conspiracy narrative claims that elites plot to undermine Aussie white men, install tyranny, and enact white genocide.

Far right extremists have used COVID-19 to reinforce inclusion /exclusion agendas resulting in rising anti-Semitic and anti-Asian sentiment. Far right extremists have spread COVID-19 related disinformation including COVID-19 denial, health fraud, and assertions of government malevolence. Findings indicated a shift of narrative focus from Australian federal government to state government and premiers. This has allowed far right extremists to align their messaging to the experiences of people who may have found state government wielding greater influence over their daily lives during the pandemic.

Far right extremists have capitalised on the opportunities COVID-19 has provided to promote civil disobedience, including calls to protest. As public health measures in response to COVID-19 continued we observed a hardening of far right extremist language on social media. Throughout the pandemic, far right extremists have sought

to mainstream their beliefs as a call to action for non-far right extremist groups, and to align their narratives with novel communities under an umbrella of anti-government and anti-establishment sentiment.

Moderation Online moderation, while necessary to fight spam and illegal content, is slow and insufficient to respond to ideas and beliefs. Users seeking to discuss and engage with far right extremist and conspiratorial narratives find novel ways to work around online moderation strategies.

Mainstream social media platforms are optimised around the promotion of hyper-engagement for users for the benefit of advertisers. The prioritisation of engagement results in the proliferation of shocking and offensive content. The report identifies some opportunities that exist to generate discussions on alternatives to content based moderation strategies. Technology can not fully solve social problems including those of social cohesion. However, it can mitigate and contribute to solutions.

Ways forward

Public communications are critical. Conflating far right extremists with broader community dissent during COVID-19 may legitimise and embolden extremists. Polarising communications that bring together public discontent and fears of COVID-19 under a lens of violent extremism can lead to further alienation of dissenting groups, pushing them towards extremist political sentiment.

Engagement strategies that allow marginalised communities to express fears and anxieties can help to increase understandings and contribute to a reduction in polarised communications. State government programs that proactively engage with active and outspoken dissenting and angry citizenship are well placed to support those impacted by conspiratorial and anti-establishment movements.

Mainstream media reporting acts as a signpost for users about far right extremists, conspiratorial thinking, and social media spaces where there is less moderation and oversight. This is not to suggest that journalistic coverage of related events is not critical, but rather that opportunities exist to continue ongoing and important discussions around the ethics and responsibilities of mainstream media journalism.

To address the impact that COVID-19 has had on the growth of conspiratorial narratives, communities need to be provided with opportunities to robustly express concerns and dissent in ways that prevent their further alignment with far right extremist movements.

1. Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a national and global crisis. Public health responses by the Australian Government have included measures such as the closing of international and domestic borders, restrictions on freedom of movement, new check-in and identification processes, and expectations and in some cases mandates around vaccination. The ongoing crisis and emergency responses have radically effected the social and behavioural norms shaping social interactions in Australia, impacting on the daily experiences of its citizens (Bonotti and Zech 2021).

This crisis has been accompanied by a global spread of misinformation and disinformation [1], sometimes described as an 'infodemic' (World Health Organization 2020). This provides both non-violent movements inspired by the perception of crisis and violent extremists alike with the opportunity to mobilise people engaging with misinformation and conspiracy theories.

The 'infodemic' poses a serious problem for public health, including a correlation between the consumption of misinformation on social media and increasing levels of non-compliance with public health measures (Bridgman et al. 2020). In parallel, the COVID-19 crisis has provided significant opportunities for far right extremists to capitalise on societal anxieties and fears to align their conspiratorial message with wider public discourse, and attempt to mobilise widely.

Our previous report identified two threats emerging from online far right extremist social networks in Australia (Ballsun-Stanton, Waldek, and Droogan 2020). The first was a creeping threat to liberal democracy caused by a shifting of the acceptable window of social and political discourse towards an extreme end point. The second was the risk of individuals adopting violent and illegal tactics to bring about sudden social change. The COVID-19 crisis has ramifications for both of these threats. As such, this report examines the ways that COVID-19 has impacted on the spread of misinformation and conspiratorial narratives and how these have been used by far right extremists.

1.1. Far right extremism and COVID-19

1.1.1. Violent extremism and COVID-19

Violent extremists of many ideological persuasions have been quick to capitalise on the anxiety and uncertainty produced by the COVID-19 pandemic (Basit 2020).

1. Misinformation refers to shared content the user/producer believes to be true but is in fact false. Disinformation refers to the deliberate sharing of false content.

The pandemic is a genuine crisis affecting individuals and societies globally, and that has necessitated the imposition of emergency measures by government (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2020). It is unsurprising that anti-government movements have harnessed public fear to spread their propaganda and undermine the status quo. Historically, violent extremists have typically relied on forms of psychological warfare to create uncertainty, undermine public trust in government, and weaken society from within (Freedman 2007). The COVID-19 pandemic has been highly useful in this regard, allowing groups and movements to exploit and inflame people's concerns, particularly around increased state control over their lives and the temporary loss of liberties.

One common strategy, observed internationally, has been for violent extremists to fit the COVID-19 narrative into their preexisting ideological perspective, adopting the pandemic as a kind of 'force multiplier.' Examples include the creation and spread of conspiracy theories claiming some nefarious purpose behind the pandemic and the state's response; or the claim COVID-19 has been unleashed upon society as a form of fateful retribution or divine vengeance. It has also been common for violent extremist movements to promote an 'accelerationist' strategy, attempting to capitalise on an expected breakdown of critical infrastructure, state authority, and social cohesion to accelerate their agendas. Other groups have attempted to appropriate the virus tactically, for instance by targeting overcrowded hospitals, using mask-wearing to facilitate crime and attacks, or using the virus to infect their enemies (Kruglanski et al. 2020).

The 'infodemic' and resulting increased levels of COVID-19 misinformation have contributed to public confusion and widespread mistrust of authoritative sources. Non-violent movements inspired by the perception of crisis as well as violent extremists have capitalised on this environment and sought to mobilise people engaging with COVID-19 misinformation and conspiracy theories. The world-wide 'Freedom-day' protest movement is one such example. Aimed at the rejection of government imposed public health measures, engagement and participation was spread online through peer-to-peer social media networks (Liyanage 2021; Ondrak and Wildon 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an environment where a sizeable minority of the public have become receptive to these influences. The general public of liberal democratic nations has suddenly faced a range of vulnerabilities either caused or exacerbated by the pandemic. Fear of COVID-19, associated lockdowns, and confusing public messaging has caused people to feel anxious and disempowered. People may have been unemployed, alone for extended periods, denied social support, and looking for answers to the disruption to their lives. During stay-at-home orders, many may have spent more time online and for longer periods.

Together, these vulnerabilities have provided opportunities for violent extremists to disseminate propaganda and misinformation online more widely than before, particularly when it is connected thematically to COVID-19 (Basit 2020). Although the internet is rarely wholly responsible for people radicalising to violent extremism, it does create vulnerabilities (Kruglanski et al. 2020; Speckhard 2020). For example, at the start of the pandemic many Australians turned to the internet to seek answers.

Here they encountered an increased spread of disinformation and anti-state narratives that undermine trust in government. Some Australians became increasingly interested in convoluted conspiracy theories such as QAnon that claim to offer solutions to the sudden complexities they faced (Gunia 2020).

1.1.2. International far right extremism and COVID-19

Internationally, far right extremist groups and movements have been quick to capitalise on the COVID-19 pandemic (Bloom 2020). This has primarily been achieved through a strategy of connecting the public health emergency with anti-state conspiracy theories, spreading disinformation campaigns aimed at fomenting chaos and panic, and calling for anti-government action (Kruglanski et al. 2020).

It is unsurprising that far right extremists have enthusiastically and creatively appropriated the pandemic to their cause. The exceptional events surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic align with long-held far right extremist narratives fixated on issues such as xenophobic nationalism, a suspicion of globalisation, and state overreach. The pandemic has seen globalisation temporarily go into retreat, while state authority over the general public has been dramatically expanded. Barriers to international and even domestic travel have encouraged a shifting of public and political discourse inwards. Consequently, in many parts of the world peoples' sub-national identities at a state, region, or even postcode level have come to the fore (Kallis 2021). These shifts have allowed public and far right extremist discourse to converge to an unprecedented degree.

In parallel to the findings in this report, much of the convergence has occurred online. A growth of far right extremist activity and audience numbers has been reported. Early in 2020, for instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, the audiences for Telegram channels associated with far right extremists grew rapidly (Crawford 2020). Facebook data shows that the QAnon movement also underwent significant popularisation at this time, growing in the USA (by over 580 %) and to a lesser extent internationally and within Australia (Argentino 2021b).

In the USA and Europe, active far right extremist anti-lockdown movements emerged to take advantage of the pandemic and public anxiety about the imposition of emergency public health measures. The far right extremist-libertarian 'Boogaloo' movement [2], for example, has proliferated rapidly on both Facebook and Twitter, largely due to the increased time many were spending online (Druzin 2020; Kunzelman 2020). Its supporters have spread disinformation about lockdowns and shelter-in-place orders, with the aim of inciting panic and chaos leading to a mass anti-government revolutionary movement (Jones and Doxsee 2020). Members with military experience have been charged with terrorism offences in the US after gathering weapons and conspiring to ferment violence at the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest in Las Vegas in June 2020 (Sheets 2020).

2. Formed in 2019, the Boogaloo movement is an anti-government, anti-authority, and anti-police extremist movement. Boogaloo is a slang reference to a future civil war, a concept embraced and anticipated by those in the movement.

Beyond explicit far right extremist-related movements, the pandemic has created opportunities for the convergence of far right extremist narratives with subcultures traditionally not associated with far right extremism. Examples include the alignment of conspiratorial thinking and other subcultures such as the wellness/spirituality movement.

Conspiratorial thinking focuses on a host of narratives claiming the existence of a malevolent global elite aiming to secretly control and harm the general public through hidden and nefarious means, often related to innovations in science and technology (Brennen et al. 2020; Shahsavari, Holur, Tangherlini, et al. 2020; Allington 2021). The wellness/spirituality movement focuses on the need for individuals to find and apply their own choice and truth-seeking in relation to their physical, mental, and spiritual health (Blakkarly 2020; McGowan 2021a, 2021b).

These subcultures are distrustful of traditional institutions, orthodoxies, and authority figures (Wiseman 2021). Each has generated narratives that place the COVID-19 pandemic and state response into these frameworks, often advocating for non-conformity with public health measures. This has provided opportunities for an alignment between these anxiety-narratives and explicitly far right extremist anti-government political ideologies.

1.1.3. Australian far right extremism and COVID-19

As of late-2021, the far right extremist movement in Australia is characterised by both crisis and opportunity. What was until recently a diverse collection of white-supremacist groups engaged in online promotion and offline confrontational street protests, has largely collapsed into a handful of national groups, [3] the most significant being the National Socialist Network and the Australian Proud Boys. These groups are under increased government and public scrutiny. Many key leaders are currently in prison, while the availability of online spaces open to their use has narrowed. Yet at the same time, the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and mass frustration with public health orders, have provided exactly the type of popular anti-government sentiment long hoped for, even prophesied, by far right extremists.

According to a 2020 assessment by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), far right extremists consider 'the pandemic as proof of the failure of globalisation, multiculturalism and democracy, and confirmation that societal collapse and a "race war" are inevitable' (Burgess 2020). The pandemic has delivered what far right extremists have long feared – the forceful (if temporary) expansion of governmental power against its own people. They have sought to harness this opportunity in their efforts to mobilise widely.

Existing studies examining online far right extremism indicate a growth in activity since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Paralleling international academic findings,

3. This does not include the possible existence of small Australian cells of international neo-Nazi accelerationist movements that engage in violence and terrorism i.e. Antipodean Resistance, Sonnenkrieg/Attomwaffen, Blood and Honour, the Order of the Nine Angles, the Southern Cross Hammerskins, The Base, and Combat 18 See (Allchorn 2021).

this has been accompanied by a similar alignment between far right extremist and COVID-19 conspiracy narratives.

For example, research conducted by Guerin et al. (2021) examined 40 geolocated Australian accounts associated with far right extremists on Gab over a three month period between June to September 2020. There was a 90% increase in posts from June to August with 13% of posts discussing COVID-19 and 4% discussing the Victorian lockdown. These COVID-19 narratives included denying the pandemic; sharing COVID-19 disinformation; condemning the government's pandemic policies; and representing lockdown as a plot to restrict freedoms and impose tyrannical rule. More widely, the pandemic was portrayed as a conspiracy perpetrated by Marxist/Jewish elites bent on destroying Western civilisation. Government intervention was presented as either inept, part of the conspiracy, or both.

This 2020 study aligned with the second lockdown in Melbourne as well as the commencement of the global racial justice and BLM protests. Indeed, BLM protests made up 7% of the Gab posts. The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis during a police arrest in May 2020 and the resulting US – and then global – protests against racism and police violence appears to have been almost as influential among Australian extremists as the pandemic. This highlights how Australian far right extremist narratives around COVID-19 have not operated in isolation of other wider national and global events. Indeed, far right extremist narratives often refer to issues occurring in other countries and reflect the broader internationalisation of far right extremist politics and activities in Australia. Global events are used in this way to create transnational narratives that support and give weight to far right extremist domestic agendas, including those that support violence and revolutionary activity (Guerin et al. 2021; Peucker 2021).

The emerging research suggests that the Australian far right extremist movement, while diverse, has creatively adopted the COVID-19 pandemic to further their preexisting agendas. It has been used to support their white-supremacist and anti-government narratives, give these narratives transnational credibility, and new reach within traditionally non-far right extremist communities attracted to conspiratorial and anti-orthodox thinking.

At base, Australian far right extremist narratives remain fixated on core beliefs that are ultra-nationalist, white supremacist, chauvinistic, authoritarian, anti-government, anti-immigration, and anti-Semitic (Allchorn 2021). Yet in a similar way to the manner in which far right extremists previously used negative perceptions of Islam among some parts of Australian society, to reach a larger audience and garner more popular support (Peucker, Smith, and Iqbal 2018), COVID-19 has proved a useful crisis narrative through which to broadcast far right extremist messages more widely and mobilise among larger audiences.

Indeed, the public health emergency due to COVID-19 is more useful to far right extremists than anti-Islamic sentiment ever was, since as a genuine crisis touching upon all elements of society and one that all Australians have experienced personally, it provides a universal vector for far right extremist exploitation and appropriation.

2. Evidence for the Widening of the Overton Window

This section explores the creeping threat posed by online far right extremist communities identified in our previous project (see Ballsun-Stanton, Waldek, and Droogan 2020). A creeping threat emerges from a shifting of the acceptable window of social and political discourse towards an extreme end point – a shift of the Overton Window (Mackinac Center for Public Policy 2019; Peeters 2020). Our study aligns with with wider international research in relation to the polarisation of public discourse online (Enders and Uscinski 2021; Iyengar and Westwood 2015).

Our analysis shows a statistically significant increase in words and phrases associated with far right extremism ($p < 0.001$). Caution is required when interpreting this finding. Far right extremist words and phrases remain a tiny proportion of the sampled comments and tweets. Users need to seek out far right extremist content and discussion by mainstream media reporting, government communications, or by platform algorithms.

In addition to an increase in far right extremist content, we saw a statistically significant increase in conspiratorial language, including QAnon specific phrases ($p < 0.001$). In contrast to unique far right extremist words, conspiratorial words and phrases never left online discussions once they had been initially been introduced (Figure 2.1).

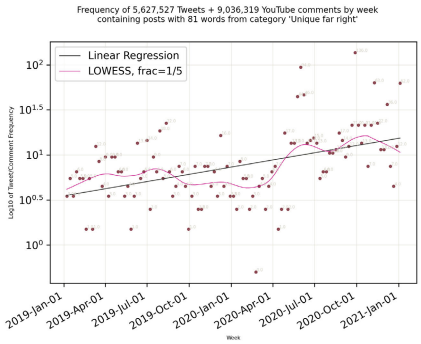
Some conspiracy theories offer far right extremists opportunities for recruitment and engagement. More broadly, these conspiratorial narratives can also weaken social cohesion, for example effecting individual decisions made around vaccination (Douglas and Sutton 2018).

This chapter explores these statistical trends and contextualises them in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the creeping threat posed by far right extremist and conspiratorial narratives in 2019, 2020, and January 2021.

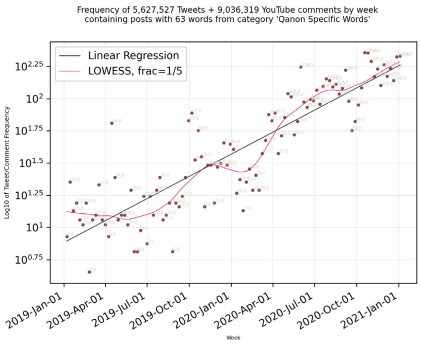
2.1. Methods

Our empirical findings draw on a large dataset from Twitter and YouTube (see sections A.1.1 and A.1.2). The dataset was used to investigate the hypothesis: 'The volume and spread of far right extremist terms in Australian social media has increased over the last two years in a statistically significant way.'

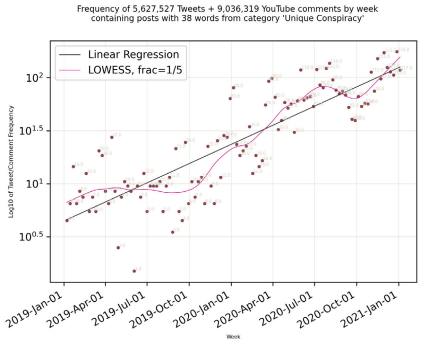
As we discuss in section A.3, our analysis here draws on statistical modelling. This modelling relied on updated wordlists that focused on four aggregated categories:



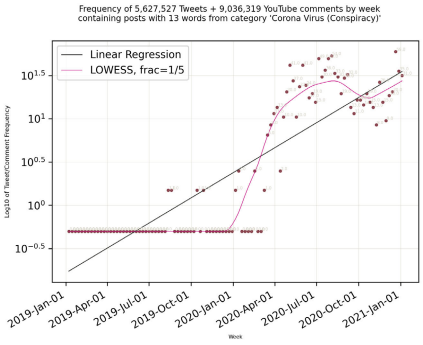
(a) Log10 count of Tweets and YouTube Comments containing words signifying far right extremist content. P-value < 0.001.



(b) Log10 count of Tweets and Comments containing words signifying QAnon content. P-value < 0.001.



(c) Log10 count of Tweets and Comments containing words signifying Conspiratorial (non-COVID-19) content. P-value < 0.001.



*(d) A **failed** linear regression on COVID-conspiracy words due to the presence of the pandemic in the middle of our dataset.*

Figure 2.1.: Charts showing the increase (on a logarithmic scale) in words associated with unique far right extremist, QAnon, unique (non-COVID-19) conspiratorial content, and COVID-conspiracy content over time. The poor fit around COVID-conspiratorial content is due to a lack of COVID-19 conspiratorial words before the pandemic.

unique far right extremist words, unique conspiratorial words, unique QAnon words, unique COVID-19 conspiratorial words (see A.3.1).

2.1.1. Proportionality

A count of posts containing words and phrases associated with far right extremism in the data set represents a tiny proportion of Australian social media posts on any given day. This small proportion may be due to the topic's unpopularity, over sensitivity to minor word differences in the matching process [1], the presence of- or learned behaviours around- moderation, or different presentations of self in public forums versus private communications (see Goffman 1959).

The counts and proportions discussed here should be considered a minimum count for these conversations, not a true measure of what proportion of posts exist online. The findings in this report should be understood within this context. For the majority of users on Twitter and YouTube, these platforms represent a space where they can engage in entertainment and socialisation, some of which includes political, conspiratorial, and at times extreme content (see A.5 for other limitations).

1. We aimed for specificity over sensitivity as we would prefer false negatives over false positives

2.2. Quantitative analysis of the creeping threat

We saw a statistically significant increasing trend in three out of four of the overarching word categories. These categories are unique far right extremist words, unique conspiratorial words, and unique COVID-19 conspiratorial words. (Figure 2.1)

To test the spread of far right extremist terms in Australian social media we examined the frequency of words uniquely associated with our categories of far right extremists, conspiracy theories, QAnon, and COVID-specific conspiracies in our Twitter and YouTube data sets between 8 January 2019 to 8 January 2021 (a 731 day period). Statistical significance was demonstrated after a smoothing curve plotted over the log-proportions of the words suggested a linear relationship.

A linear regression was plotted (see Section A.3.2 and the results in figure 2.1), with good fit, on the log-counts of the word incidence proportions showing a positive increase with statistical significance. This trend shows that our initial hypothesis of an increase in the volume and spread of far right extremist terms in Australian social media over the past two years was correct.

We can confidently see for the categories of unique far right extremist, unique conspiracy, and QAnon conspiracy words, a statistically significant increase during this time period. Despite the overall low levels found in our data, conspiratorial language has become both established and normalised within conversations on Twitter and YouTube.

Our present dataset indicates that the rate of increase in conspiratorial language is greater than the rate of increase in far right extremist language (Figures 2.1a, 2.1c). The COVID-19 pandemic has generated significant levels of societal anxiety and stress. This situation has resulted in a rapid growth in the reported levels of disinformation, conspiratorial, and catastrophising content that has spread across the digital environment with real-world impact (Uscinski et al. 2020).

The rise in disinformation and conspiratorial narratives associated with COVID-19 has grown from an already increasingly toxic political rhetoric, a rise in populism, and a growth in misinformation and conspiratorial belief (Oliver and Wood 2014; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Research on conspiratorial beliefs suggests how the holding of one conspiracy belief is an excellent predictor of an individual engaging with and believing in other conspiracy theories.

Given the above finding, our research highlights the challenges created when these types of beliefs enter into and remain in online communications (Goertzel 1994; Swami et al. 2011; Wood, Douglas, and Sutton 2012). Conspiratorial thinking, disinformation, and toxic polarised political discourse provide opportunities for far right extremist actors to recruit and engage. It also presents a threat to liberal democratic values, ideals, and to social cohesion.

These statistical trends indicate a growth of antisocial discussion. We can only speculate if these increases are likely to continue or decline in the future. Considering the crisis

of 2021 and the various and ongoing Australian lock-downs, these trends are unlikely to reverse without external intervention.

2.3. Qualitative analysis of the creeping threat

The digital environment is influenced by real world events. This is particularly the case for Twitter, a platform that has become closely associated with sources of 'Real-time information and as a source of debate in news, politics, business, and entertainment' (Weller et al. 2013, p. xxx). The statistically significant increase in unique far right extremist words reflects real-world events that have sparked discussion for and against far right extremism. Events including the George Floyd race riots, media probing of Trump associations with the Proud Boys as part of the presidential debates, and the incitements and discussion leading up to the Capitol Riots, all become stimuli for public discussion, driving tweets and, to a lesser degree, YouTube comments in Australia.

The interconnectivity between real world events and the digital environment is reflected in deeper analysis of the outliers seen in Figure 2.1. The far right extremist-associated group 'Proud Boys' features throughout our dataset with the first recorded incident in our time frame occurring in the week 28 January 2019. By counting the number of comments and tweets mentioning 'Proud Boys', we see how social media discourse mirrors news and world events (see Table 2.1).

References to 'Proud Boys' are relatively low. In early 2019, weeks go past without any mentions at all. Then in June-July 2019 they enter the news cycle, mentions go up, and then fade by September 2019. Mentions rise again in June 2020. Unfortunately, from this point onward, they never entirely leave discussion. There is a spike in September 2020 when President Trump was pressed on the issues of white supremacy and militia groups during nationally televised debates (CNBC Television 2020).

Mentions of 'Proud boys' are not only the result of a US-centric bias in our Australian sample. The spike in September 2020 also reflected reporting on the decision taken by British clothing label Fred Perry to stop US sales of a black and yellow polo shirt the Proud Boys had adopted as an informal uniform (Woodyatt 2019). These two incidents likely had an impact on the news cycle in Australia. Both represent how multiple sources of media coverage can sustain and legitimise social media commentary on a topic. This finding reinforces the important relationship between traditional media sources and social media identified in our previous report.

Table 2.1.: Posts on Twitter and YouTube mentioning `Proud Boys` by week in 2019-2021

'Proud Boys'	Week
2	2019-01-28
2	2019-02-04
3	2019-02-25
2	2019-03-11
11	2019-06-10
2	2019-06-17
2	2019-06-24
12	2019-07-01
1	2019-07-08
2	2019-07-22
2	2019-07-29
1	2019-08-05
15	2019-08-12
5	2019-08-19
3	2019-09-09
4	2019-11-11
2	2020-01-20
2	2020-02-03
1	2020-03-09
2	2020-05-25
14	2020-06-01
6	2020-06-08
3	2020-06-15
7	2020-06-22
1	2020-06-29
2	2020-07-06
1	2020-07-27
2	2020-08-03
4	2020-08-10
7	2020-08-17
4	2020-08-24
5	2020-09-07
12	2020-09-21
154	2020-09-28
17	2020-10-05
12	2020-10-12
20	2020-10-19
7	2020-10-26
26	2020-11-02
72	2020-11-09
4	2020-11-16
3	2020-11-23
40	2020-11-30
50	2020-12-07
10	2020-12-14
1	2020-12-21
11	2020-12-28
57	2021-01-04

2.4. Conspiratorial thinking and anti-establishmentism

Variation in the use of conspiratorially charged language was highlighted in analysis of a lexical dispersion plot [2] of conspiratorial phrases in our dataset (Figure 2.2). Exploring conspiratorial tweets and comments in our data indicated that while there is a deep historical association of phrases such as 'New World Order' with far right extremism, other terms creep away from their far right extremist affiliation (Hsu 2013). These words are used to communicate frustration/dissatisfaction with the current government, as indicated in the use of the term 'cabal' in the following example:

> #auspol Australia is being lead by an unrepresentative, corrupt, right wing cabal. Dangerous times with COVID-19, bushfires...

Another example highlights how the term 'cabal' has moved towards a more generalised anti-establishment position:

> Australia, like the US, is on the way to being a failed state. The ruling cabal are owned by the fossil fuel industry...they are trashing our institutions, politicising the public service & tearing down the walls between church and state. The gloves need to come off.

All of these terms, while used without a clear far right extremist slant, afford a descent into anti-establishment ideological rhetoric. More familiar far right extremist anti-Semitic and white-fragility themes can be found only a few searches/hashtags away. The following quote is one such example of what can still be written on extensively moderated social media platforms:

> We are all living under Jewish rule... the Jewish empire. This is all about the New World Order, one world government, with its headquarters and world court being in Israel.

The connotations of these terms and their association with far right extremism are not always understood by those who retweet or otherwise reuse the terms. However, such amplification of these terms can lead users to social media spaces aligned with anti-democratic sentiment. These environments explain all harms as being the fault of the establishment and offer narratives that provide comfort, certainty, and a clear enemy in an uncertain world. A key finding of this report relates to the appropriation of language by anti-democratic groups and organisations, that in turn limits effective and transparent discussion of societal fears and concerns.

2.5. The spread of QAnon

We saw a statistically significant increase in terms associated with the QAnon conspiracy narrative (see Figure 2.1b). This finding indicates that QAnon narratives had entered into mainstream online social media discourse in 2020 (Newton 2020; Kerstein 2021). Examination of tweets and comments associated with QAnon indicates the presence of

2. A lexical dispersion plot charts the frequency of term appearance within a dataset over time. In our case, it displays the frequency of comments or tweets containing one or more instances of the indicated word or phrase per week.

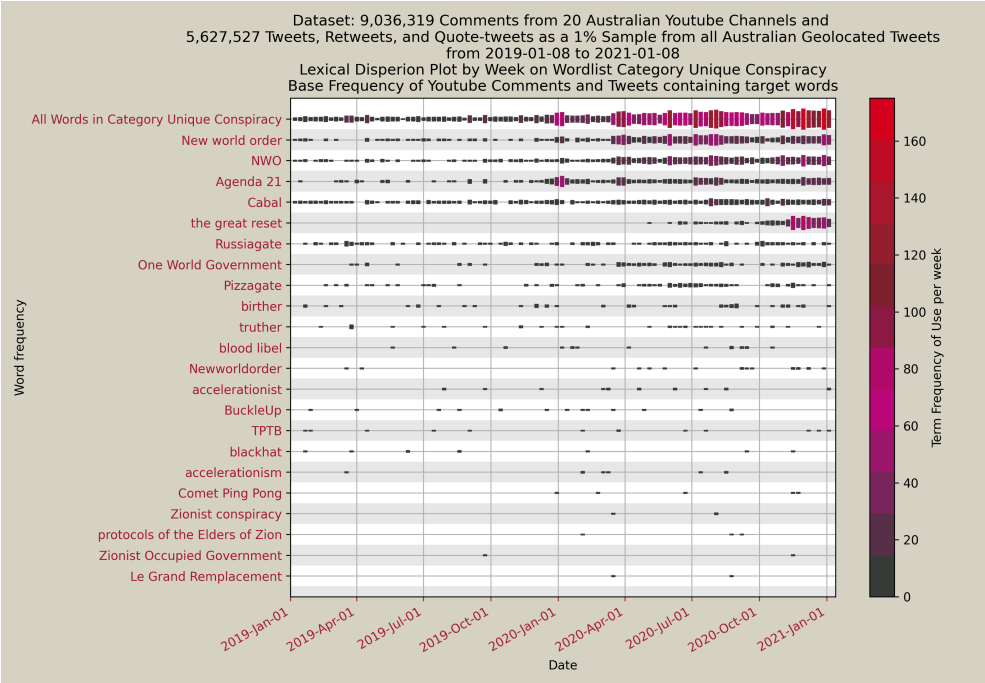


Figure 2.2.: A lexical dispersion plot of term occurrence over time with phrases signifying conspiratorial thinking.

for- and against discussion. The increase highlights how discussion – even where it is against a given conspiracy theory – still drives engagement with the narrative.

The work of Enders et al. (2021) informs our analysis. Their research shows how support for the conspiracy theory QAnon and its associated movement is statistically independent of left-right political orientations. The authors argue that individuals are drawn to QAnon because of its anti-establishment narrative, as opposed to traditional left/right political concerns. Those with antagonistic views of the established political order have their 'anti' suspicions confirmed by the conspiratorial narrative. Engagement with QAnon provides a useful example of the ability of conspiratorial narratives to align individuals and groups despite conflicting political orientations. These types of alignments are further discussed in Chapter 3.

Anti-establishment narratives offer a better lens for public communication strategies than viewing these posts purely from a far right extremist frame. Users in this space are less-focused on left-right political orientations. Instead being galvanised by anti-establishment sentiment (Uscinski and Parent 2014; Uscinski et al. 2021).

The real-world impact of conspiratorial narratives are highlighted in reports discussing the role QAnon played in the lead up to the Capitol riots. While the riots may have been incited without the benefit of QAnon, this anti-establishment conspiracy may have created ready and willing social networks to spread and plan the riots within (Sasse 2021; Wheeler 2021; LaFrance 2021; Rondeaux 2021; The Q Origins Project 2021).

2.6. Conspiracy and the COVID-19 pandemic

The beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in the middle of our data collection period between 8 January 2019 to 8 January 2021. Drawing trends around COVID-19 conspiracies from the YouTube and Twitter data set we collected, therefore, is not possible in this report (see 2.1d). To examine trends during the second lock-down would necessitate a new data collection period running into 2022. We therefore sought to understand how Australian far right extremists were using conspiratorial trends and COVID-19 during the second lock-down period through a qualitative case-study drawing on data collected from Telegram and Instagram posts.

Table 2.2.: Count of tweets and comments containing the word `coronavirus' by month

Coronavirus	Month
1	2019-03-01
1222	2020-01-01
2616	2020-02-01
15 602	2020-03-01
7698	2020-04-01
4608	2020-05-01
3656	2020-06-01
4945	2020-07-01
5618	2020-08-01
4017	2020-09-01
4156	2020-10-01
3118	2020-11-01
2567	2020-12-01

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, mentions of the virus tracked with the spread of the pandemic. Discussions on Twitter and YouTube spanned the full spectrum of understandings and misunderstandings in relation to the emerging virus. Social media discussion reflected public health uncertainty and anxiety and evolving government responses (Bonotti and Zech 2021). Paralleling research conducted by Bridgman et al. (2020), many turned to social media to seek understandings of threats, acceptable responses, and socially unacceptable claims. One example is the acceptability of discussing the origins of the virus where there has been a blurring of 'orthodox' narratives with 'conspiratorial' narratives.

These conspiratorial narratives evolved in online echo chambers. While echo chambers exist in the digital environment they only affect relatively few people (Guess 2021). Users are drawn into echo chambers through the efforts of a few influencers. These influencers, however, drive very large amounts of traffic to 'successful' conspiratorial narratives (Lewis 2018).

An example of successful conspiratorial narrative spread in our dataset is the word 'plandemic'[3]. Since then the term has outgrown its documentary roots and gone viral. 'Plandemic' became an umbrella term in the digital environment alluding towards unease around official narratives on COVID-19 and anti-establishment anti-democratic conspiratorial beliefs. These beliefs are reflected in the following comment made on a 7News video on YouTube:

> This is a Plannedemic and a scamdemic... look up Lock Step 2010 Rockefeller Foundation, Event 201 and the Italy Blows Lid on Vaccine Scam. ... Watch the David Icke 2 and half hour interview ... that was deleted by Youtube the day it was posted... Go to Bitchute and do you own research... realise everything I am telling you is true. Stop getting your info from the mainstream media propaganda machine. Good luck with your awakening.

Australians were looking for answers, explanations, and scapegoats while experiencing public health measures and government sanctions that directly impinged upon democratic norms and values. They looked online – being denied other routes of social

3. This term was first used in reference to a video 'Plandemic: The Hidden Agenda Behind Covid-19' produced by Mikki Willis and Judy Mikovits that promotes a series of conspiracy beliefs that vaccines are money making enterprises and that COVID-19 is part of a decade long plan to control humanity by an elite. Released on 4 May 2020, the professional and slick video went viral (Hatmaker 2020).

interaction – and as our study (Chapter 3) has demonstrated found an environment providing ready-made conspiratorial and anti-establishment answers.

This environment provides fertile ground for recruitment and engagement into organisations and networks pedalling hate, violence, and conflict (Brewer 1999). Some proportion of the audience seeing these tweets and comments rejected governmental public health messaging and found support of their views in these conspiratorial posts. COVID-19 provided far right extremists with a unique opportunity to align recruitment with anti-establishment orientations online and in the real-world.

Table 2.3.: Incidence of the word `Plandemic' in Comments and Tweets from 8 Jan 2019 to 1 Jan 2021

Plandemic	Month
19	2020-03-01
99	2020-04-01
293	2020-05-01
375	2020-06-01
426	2020-07-01
662	2020-08-01
435	2020-09-01
392	2020-10-01
168	2020-11-01
393	2020-12-01

Reflecting the unique Australian focus of the dataset, references to COVID-19 declined as the various states and territories, including Victoria, reopened following initial lock-downs. Data collection did not cover the arrival of the Delta variant and the resumption of lock-down /stay-at-home public health measures adopted across Australia in mid to late 2021.

Extrapolating from trends in our data, we would presume that opportunities for far right extremist alignment with conspiratorial messaging to have continued to increase during the lockdowns. Once the public health emergency in Australia eases, we do not anticipate the exponential growth of conspiratorial narratives online we saw in 2020 to continue. Although we note that having now entered into a small part of online public discussion, these conspiratorial narratives will however be unlikely to disappear.

2.7. Themes and narratives on YouTube and Twitter

The far right extremist themes and narratives identified in our previous project were examined to explore their resonance with a broader mainstream Australian audience (Ballsun-Stanton, Waldek, and Droogan 2020). These themes were ‘American populist politics’, ‘white identity under threat’, ‘conspiracy theories’, ‘processes of othering’, ‘anti-Semitism, anti-government, anti-liberal, Islamophobia, anti-Asian, anti-racist, homophobia, and misogyny’. It is encouraging that these themes of far right extremism and conspiracy are not endemic in relation to every day discussion on these platforms. This in part likely reflects the automated moderation strategies of platforms such as YouTube and Twitter.

2.7.1. The influence of American politics on user engagement

American politics remains a consistent topic of discussion and debate among the wider Australian population. This is particularly true on Twitter, a social platform for those seeking real time information on world events and a platform that rewards tweets that generate high engagement. Engagement is understood here as the frequency of interactions, likes and reposts within a given social network (Waldek 2021).

Controversial statements or actions by President Trump drove engagement. Beyond Trump, events such as the death of George Floyd and the international protests that followed, and the 2020 American elections all influenced the general Australian public. Highly engaged hyperlinks also reflect the prevalence of US politics as a source of engagement in an Australian social media sample. For example, one highly engaged hyperlink took users to a website 'I will vote', a marketing website funded by the Democratic National Committee detailing how US citizens could vote in the 2020 elections. It had a global engagement count of 3,592,479[4]. The hyperlink was part of a strategic well-funded digital campaign across all social media by the Democratic party in America (Swant 2020). The example demonstrates the reach of US informed discussion. And, more to the point, the reach of US marketing campaigns in Australia.

2.7.2. Conspiratorial narratives, far right extremism, and user engagement

Within this framework of sociality, conspiratorial thinking is present and increasing in a statistically significant manner. However, these types of narratives and beliefs are still marginal. The majority of people within our dataset were not discussing conspiratorial topics using the key words we identified. Noting that users are often aware of the presence of moderation policies and change their behaviours accordingly as is discussed in Chapter 4.

Far right extremist content was present on both platforms. These terms represented a small percentage of daily conversations and activities. Mainstream media reporting of President Trump's naming of the group 'Proud Boys' in the first presidential debate created a spike in our dataset. However, even at the height of this reporting the use of the term was incredibly small. In the week of 9 November 2020, there were only 890 YouTube comments mentioning 'Proud Boys' within the 293,914 posted in total. On Twitter, on 28 September 2020, there were 123 Tweets within the 69,820 Tweets posted that week in our dataset.

On YouTube the tone of comments, discussions, and debates unsurprisingly reflects the content of specific videos. Offensive language and discussion remain even on moderated and heavily curated channels. These in fact may be tolerated (or even actively encouraged) by the channel owner as a means of driving up engagement with said video to appease 'the algorithm' – any user actions, positive or negative, on a video will drive recommendations of that video.

Overall we suggest that phenomenon such as QAnon and even the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic will eventually be over taken by other media trends and world events. As attention turns away from the pandemic, opportunities for far right extremists to align with anti-lockdown narratives and COVID-19 conspiracies will reduce. However, the statistically significant growth of far right extremist language, conspiratorial thinking, and conspiracy beliefs represents a continuing and hard-to-reverse threat

4. This engagement count is a world-wide engagement count. The presence of these links in our sample show that some Australian users retweeted, quote-tweeted, or replied to this large and coordinated marketing campaign.

to liberal democracy as future crises will offer new opportunities. Conflating far right extremists with this broader conspiratorial focused audience may legitimise and embolden extremists. It may also lead to further alienation of users engaging with conspiratorial narratives, pushing them towards fringe debates, influencers, and smaller more niche social media platforms.

3. Case Study: The COVID-19 pandemic as a far right extremist narrative

> 'Covid-19' is a weapon designed in a lab to rob and destroy the main opposition to the Jewish Global Financial System – that being White people. The covid vaccine is a bio-weapon designed in a lab to damage your fertility and if you do manage to have children, they will be infertile. The Australian Government wants Whites disarmed, disorganized, disinfo'od by the mainstream media, and schools, demoralized, atomized and divided. Governments around the world are panicking as they did not expect there to be such a resistance to their conspiracy. (Tom Sewell, Telegram, 11 December 2020).

The previous section provided statistical analysis of social media data from 2019-2020. This section presents the results of a qualitative case study of far right extremist and far right extremist-aligned Telegram accounts, Instagram accounts, and wider online sources collected mostly through 2021. It provides a thematic analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic has been appropriated by Australian far right extremists to further their objectives, spread their ideology online, and recruit people to their cause.

The thematic framework identifies significant COVID-19 related topics found to be prevalent in the data. These topics form subheadings for the sections below. In each section, we summarise the theme, give select examples from the data, and contextualise the findings within the wider emerging scholarship and high-quality journalistic reporting on the alignment between far right extremism and the COVID-19 pandemic. For further details on the method and framework (See A.4)

3.1. Exploiting the pandemic to serve inclusion/exclusion agendas

The far right extremist individuals and groups analysed on Telegram consistently appropriated the pandemic to illustrate and reinforce their preexisting in-group versus out-group narrative (Ballsun-Stanton, Waldek, and Droogan 2020; Berger 2018). Posts referring positively to the in-group mainly fell into two categories: pro-white identity, and pro-Australian nationalism. COVID-19 and the public health response was presented as an attack on these positive identity markers, i.e. the traditional white 'Aussie male'. Conspiracy theories were used to explain how this attack was secretly being orchestrated by members of the out-group.

A larger number of COVID-19 related posts focused on out-groups, particularly Jews, Asians, immigrants, and those who support and facilitate a multicultural and cosmo-

politan Australia. The pandemic was seen as being caused by these groups, usually Jews or in some cases the Chinese, through a hidden global conspiracy aimed at undermining Australia and white masculine identity. There were very few posts linking the pandemic with Muslims or Islam, and almost no posts linked the pandemic with LGBT or Indigenous issues. This is a significant departure from previous far right extremist narratives that often fixated on these topics, particularly Islam, Islamic immigration, and terrorism (Dean, Bell, and Vakhitova 2016; Peucker, Smith, and Iqbal 2018).

The pandemic has not resulted in the addition of significant new narratives to far right extremist online discourse. Instead, the global health crisis has been exploited to spread long-held tropes reinforcing the fundamental in-group/out-group dichotomy that serves as the foundation for far right extremist racism, white chauvinism, and violence. Parallel research on the Gab platform has come to similar conclusions (Guerin et al. 2021). The rise of conspiratorial explanations for the pandemic, however, have resulted in shifts in far right extremist discourse to emphasise some traditional outgroups (Jews), refocus on newer outgroups (Chinese), and lose focus of former highly cited outgroups (Muslims).

Figure 3.1.: Instagram post from a militant wellness individual. The pandemic is a plot to enhance government control of populations

Posts in our sample suggest that the pandemic has reinforced existing far right extremist narratives around anti-globalisation, the illegitimacy of liberal democracy, the tyrannical nature of the Australian government, and the hatred of outgroups. As a crisis that has affected all Australians, creating widespread insecurity and fear, the pandemic has provided an opportunity for far right extremists to connect these fears to popular anxieties about national identity and the scapegoating of outgroups held responsible. This attempted popularisation of far right extremist in-group/out-group sentiment by attaching it to an active and ongoing societal crisis is concerning. It has the potential to use the COVID-19 pandemic to mainstream far right extremist narratives among those Australians who already hold negative and anti-egalitarian views on multiculturalism and immigration (Markus 2019; Peucker et al. 2020).

Pro White Identity Posts about Australian white identity were framed as celebrations of the superior history, achievements, and culture of white civilisation, while at the same time demonstrating a strongly conspiratorial and paranoid tone. COVID-19 was consistently presented as a manufactured or illusory threat designed to attack white Australian men and women. Vaccination was discussed as part of a strategy of demographic replacement enacted by elites to eliminate the white population. Vaccination was presented as a form of eugenics, a way of infecting 'pure' white blood and sterilising white women. This racialisation of the virus and vaccine is well-summarised in the XYZ online article 'I'm not unvaccinated, I'm PUREBLOOD' (Piggott 2021).

Being pro-white was presented as a way of building self-esteem among young men by instilling pride in their being part of the 'greatest culture created by god'. Posts were

framed around a concern for white male youth vulnerable to suicide, and consequent need for the adoption of a positive rugged racial identity. Conversely, following government-imposed health orders, especially vaccination, was presented as a form of male castration, cowardliness, and the capitulation to non-white global elites.

Pandemic restrictions were represented as a plan by elites to weaken Australian white males. According to this narrative, the media, economic dislocation, and COVID are tactics used to dishearten white people and nullify resistance. Government actions are designed to make people weak, stupid, depressed, lazy, and reliant on handouts. A typical post would claim: 'Health replaced by pharmaceuticals. Education replaced by programming. Hard work replaced by handouts. These people hate you.' Consequentially, 'the best defence is offence, be ready to defend yourself, start training now'.

'*Once you become aware of the great replacement and the obvious attacks on white culture it is your duty to fight*'

8 May 2021

'*Words like "racist" "conspiracy theorists" "Nazis" or "anti-vaxxer" are enough to turn the majority of men into cowards*'

21 April 2021

Pro Australian Nationalism Far right extremist posts related to COVID-19 and the pandemic made frequent appeals to an ultra-nationalist sentiment combined with strong racist and anti-white dogma. Australian nationalists like them, it was claimed, are deemed terrorists by media, the government, and academics purely because they combine their nationalism with racism.

A prominent narrative presented the government using public health restrictions on freedom of movement as a way of undermining the proud white Australia built by Europeans, replacing it with a tyrannical Bolshevik communist dystopia. Globalisation was presented as the disease, coronavirus the symptom, while a reinvigorated, racist, and xenophobic nationalism as the cure.

This nationalist theme was also expressed in a popular narrative blaming globalisation for the pandemic, and providing the trigger for Australia's supposed current slide into tyranny. If Australians had focused on Australian issues, it was argued, and remained economically self-sufficient, they would not have been infected by the globalised virus. Indeed, since the onset of the pandemic far right extremists have vocally called for borders to be closed, immigration permanently stopped, and international students to go home and stay home (Blakkarly 2020; Peucker et al. 2020). This is why many of the emergency measures imposed early in the pandemic, such as the closing of international borders and cessation of immigration, were applauded by far right extremists.

Antisemitism Anti-Semitism presented strongly across our sample, and was related to conspiracies and wider anti-government and anti-elite sentiment.

The COVID-19 pandemic was consistently presented as an attack on white Australians perpetrated by an international 'globalist' Jewish cabal secretly in charge of world affairs. This theme was so prevalent that it should be seen as one of the defining conspiratorial narratives at the heart of far right extremist discussion about the pandemic. Numerous posts and memes claimed that leaders and experts associated with

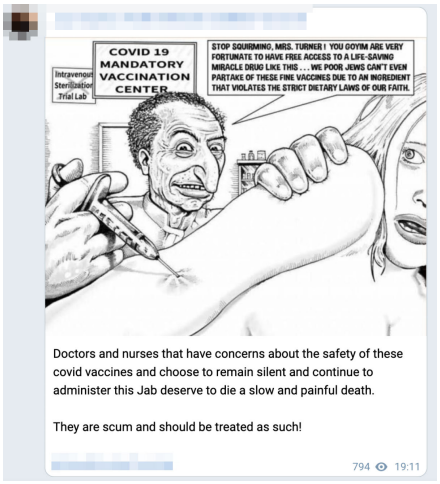


Figure 3.2.: Anti-Semitic memes from far right Telegram accounts linking the pandemic with supposed Jewish malevolence

the pandemic and its response were all Jewish and plotting to hide that the virus is either not real, the pretext for an attack on public liberty, or both. Claims included that COVID-19 experts, the pharmaceutical companies, the World Health Organization, the Australian Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, and others were all Jewish controlled and engaged in a global conspiracy against non-Jews.

'Our world is rising, the time of the Jewish overlords is coming to an end!' 1 August 2021

These narratives claimed that while previously immigration was used to undermine white racial identity in Australia, Jewish interests were now orchestrating the global public health crisis to achieve the same end more rapidly through the forced sterilisation of non-Jews. Racial memes play on these fears by depicting a male 'happy Jew' caricature injecting a terrified naked white woman with a vaccine, while a sign behind reveals this to be a front for forced sterilisation. These narratives and imagery play on longstanding and pre-modern anti-Semitic tropes that depicted Jews as transmitters of pestilence, disease, and plague (Cohn 2007).

There has been a noticeable rise of anti-Semitism in Australia since the commencement of the pandemic, due in part to conspiratorial thinking claiming Jews to be responsible (Carlin, 2021). This has included reports of an increase in physical assaults, verbal abuse, and intimidation (Nathan 2020). This is in addition to anti-Semitic stickering campaigns during the 'Freedom Rally' and 'Million Rise for Australia' anti-lockdown protests and Victoria and NSW (Carlin 2021; Connolly 2020; McGowan 2021c).

Anti-Asian Sampled Anti-Asian posts negatively depicted either Asian Australians as carriers of the virus, or, more commonly, China or the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as somehow responsible for the pandemic. Online, COVID-19 is commonly termed the 'Chinese virus' among extremist communities and implied to be part of a Chinese bioweapon (perhaps sponsored by Israel) used to attack the West and white populations.

A broader anti-China narrative claims that the Australian government and Australian males have become impotent while China prepares to attack and invade. By weakening Australian white men, the pandemic is presented as part of the 200-year plan by the CCP to take over the world. Emergency public health mechanisms such as the COVIDSafe app, use of QR codes for registration, and CCTV social distancing tracking are cited as the start of the imposition of a Chinese style 'communist' social credit system and rollback of civic freedoms.

A rise in anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism, as well as posts blaming China for the virus, have been noted among the Australian online far right extremist milieu since the early stages of the pandemic (Guerin et al. 2020; Guerin et al. 2021). At the same time, international far right extremist narratives blaming the spread of COVID-19 on Asian and immigrant communities have proliferated (Kallis 2021). These include the online QAnon conspiratorial movement that has prominently claimed that the virus is a Chinese bioweapon designed to disrupt and destroy the global economy and, in doing so, former President Donald Trump's chances of re-election (Argentino 2020). Offline, a rise in street violence against Asian Australians has been observed in Australia and the USA (Blakkarly 2020; Anti-Defamation League 2020).

3.2. Exploiting the pandemic to spread disinformation

Online RWE discourse commonly presented false claims about the COVID-19 virus, the pandemic, and the government response. These narratives include misinformation mainly relating to alternative COVID-19 treatment, and more commonly disinformation aimed at downplaying or denying the existence of the virus and ascribing malevolent intent to the government's response, particularly vaccination. This has provided far right extremists with the opportunity to align their narratives with wider public anxiety and alarm, particularly among subcultures already prising values of political dissent, truth seeking, free thinking, free speech, and 'doing your own research'.

'The system is not there to help, its intention is to make us weak and dependent.' 12 August 2021

A core of explicitly white chauvinistic and supremacist values remain and underlie these popularising narratives. COVID-19 disinformation and conspiracism functions, ultimately, to delegitimise centres of authority, institutions, and government. Anti-government narratives have shifted to incorporate a stronger focus on the Australian state governments, which contrasts with the earlier far right extremist focus on federal politics.

COVID-19 denial COVID-19 denialism was strongly prevalent in our sample. Posts mostly mirrored wider public discourse in minimising the threat posed by the virus, arguing for example that COVID-19 led to lessor mortality rate than the flu. The sample also included examples of intentional disinformation, for example doctored YouTube clips purporting to show the NSW Deputy

'There is no Covid.. Do not put up with their genocide…' 29 July 2021

Premier stating that most people hospitalised with severe COVID-19 symptoms were vaccinated.

More extreme narratives claimed that neither the virus nor the pandemic in fact existed, but were merely a front allowing the government greater control over the population. These claims fit a larger conspiratorial narrative arguing that COVID-19 is a manufactured crisis, justifying the popular rejection of government authority and engagement in civil disobedience. This presented a mobilising narrative designed to encourage mass action in the face of a supposed public health hoax. Desired action ranged from celebrating businesses that refused to adopt mask mandates, to outright calls for popular protest and revolt.

COVID-19 health fraud Far right extremist Telegram accounts included significant misinformation, at times disinformation, particularly about the supposed harms of vaccination. Claims about the dangers of vaccination were used to appeal to wider non-far right extremist audiences anxious or hesitant about vaccination, especially those pursuing alternative wellness remedies.

The supposed dangers of COVID-19 vaccination were presented in a targeted way to appeal to popular fears around male strength and virility as well as female fertility. The former included memes about male jiu-jitsu martial arts practitioners becoming disfigured and unable to fight after vaccination. The latter, centred on the common claim that the majority of pregnancies were terminated after vaccination. More widely, there was an assertion that becoming vaccinated would either kill a person or increase their chances of dying from COVID-19. Posts claiming to show a 2-year-old who dies from the COVID-19 vaccine, or memorialising people who died after supposedly being coerced into taking it, were accompanied by highly sensational and emotive imagery.

Far right extremist online culture exhibited a focus on themes associated with wider health, wellness, and spirituality movements not typically associated with far right extremism. An emphasis on male health, the need to be a thinker as well as a fighter, and a martial arts centred concern with holistic mind-body-spirit training and wellness were all common themes found in our sample. Gyms practising mixed martial arts and Brazilian jiu-jitsu were emphasised as places of offline training and socialisation.

'They demand that we stay in isolation and be silent while they drive our country into ruin and inject the masses with a experimental 'vaccine' for a 'virus' that isn't real. Lies Intimidation and bullying are no sustainable ways to govern a country. ' 22 July 2021

Prominent narratives around the supposedly manufactured and conspiratorial nature of COVID-19 were identical to those adopted by wider alternative health, wellness, and spirituality movements. An emerging alignment between anti-establishment conspiracy narratives and the wellness community has been noted by researchers for the last decade. In 2011 the term 'conspiritualism' was coined to describe an increasingly distrustful and conspiratorial fringe of alternative wellness and spiritual subcultures (Ward and Voas 2011). The pandemic and imposition of government health orders and emergency measures have

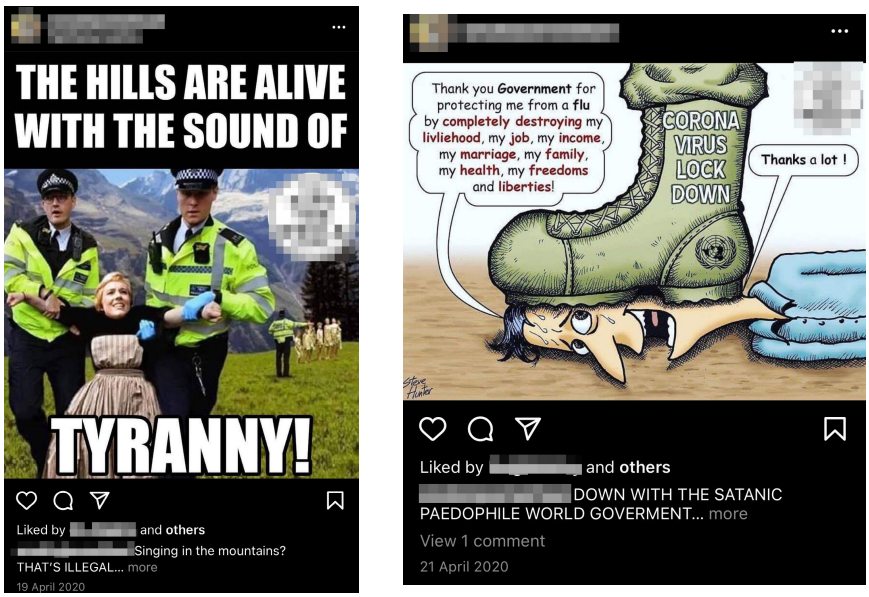


Figure 3.3.: Instagram memes connecting the pandemic with government malevolence and tyranny

exacerbated this convergence, allowing the conspiratorial wellness community to align with explicitly far right extremist narratives (Wiseman 2021).

The wellness industry's preoccupation with individual choice, truth-seeking, distrust of traditional institutions, and the challenging of established orthodoxies (particularly those related to health) has made it vulnerable to adopting a wider scepticism about 'experts' of any form, including government (Wilson 2020; Blakkarly 2020, 2020). Some extremist movements such as QAnon have been specifically branded on platforms such as Instagram to appeal to alternative health and spirituality influencers, lifestyle coaches, and middle-class 'soccer mums' (Argentino 2021a). Yet, behind this 'pastel' branding, there remains a core narrative of anti-COVID-19 disinformation, the blame and hatred of othered out-groups, and potential for anti-state violence.

Government malevolence Conspiratorial narratives concerned with the pandemic regularly portray state and federal government as engaged in a plot to restrict the freedoms Australians, install tyranny, and, in extreme versions, enact a 'white genocide'. Both sides of politics are described as using health restrictions, mass vaccinations, and vaccine passports to install a form of totalitarianism and to destroy or otherwise weaken white men. Posts consistently use language and images that either lampoon authority and undermine government credibility, or in most cases create distrust of government and foster anti-government sentiment and fear.

> '*Ive said it from the start, anyone stupid enough to take the vaccine deserves to die, and at this stage I'm pretty sure that's the whole point anyway*'
>
> 19 May 2021

This focus on government overreach in aid of a malevolent purpose aligns with common far right extremist narratives that have been distributed online and offline since long before the pandemic ((Ballsun-Stanton, Waldek, and Droogan 2020; Peucker, Smith, and Iqbal 2018). Liberal democracy in Australia is represented as having always been a lie, but one that now exists only as a façade practised by scheming elites who use

the pandemic to replace white people. Posts about tyrannical government overreach regularly combine a focus on COVID-19 with complaints about older established grievances, for instance the imposition of the Safe Schools Program or the replacement of colonial place names with indigenous alternatives. The imposition of emergency public health orders, however, has given far right extremists a new opportunity to speak to, and potentially mobilise, members of the public who have a direct experience of what they consider to be state overreach.

Narratives claiming government overreach during the pandemic regularly focus on the dangers of technology, either newly devised pharmaceuticals such as vaccinations, or systems of public surveillance. Prominent themes include the claim that facial recognition technology is being used to check temperatures and to police mask-wearing, paving the way for a future communist totalitarianism. In this vein, both state and federal government are labelled as illegitimate 'regimes', while vaccination checks and QR-code location check-ins are likened to 'checking papers', and mandatory quarantine is 'off to the gulag'. Posts reporting that the NSW chief medical officer told people to reduce speaking even when wearing masks are used to point to sinister Orwellian motives.

> This is not just about injecting chemical agents with God-knows-what consequences, but a new system of control using vaccine passports, entailing a life of permanent surveillance, Chinese-style social credit system, one-world currency and Government, radical social engineering and population reduction. All of these things have been stated as goals either by the UN, World Economic Forum, Gates Foundation, Rockefeller Health or other groups out in the open (Logos 2021)

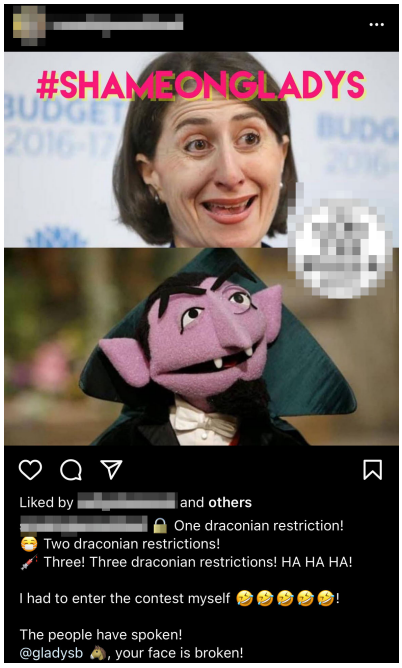


Figure 3.4.: Instagram meme targeting NSW state politics as a focus for anger during the pandemic

Current events are regularly fitted into these conspiratorial narratives as they gain media coverage. Posts on far right extremist sites link to stories on ABC news about police in South Australia being able to use 'any force necessary' to impose compliance with health orders. Police using rubber bullets to fire on Melbourne protesters in late August 2021, or using QR check-in data to help solve crimes (Galloway 2021), are cited to add credibility to these narratives.

While anti-government narratives and claims about the tyrannical nature of Australian democracy are established tropes used by the extremist fringe, the pandemic has resulted in a shift in how these narratives are wielded to reach wider populations and receive wider appeal. Posts citing the everyday experiences of Australians during the pandemic, such as the choice of whether to get vaccinated or download and use the COVIDSafe app, are designed to align with mass public sentiment. A shift from focusing on Australian federal government and political figures to instead focusing on state government and Premiers in their disinformation allows extremists to align their messaging with the experiences of people who during the pandemic may find state government wielding more influence over their daily lives.

3.3. Exploiting the pandemic to promote civil disobedience

Hope about the pandemic bringing about mass protest, revolution, or societal collapse was an early theme amongst the extreme right in Australia (Blakkarly 2020). Posts in our sample consistently used the pandemic to mobilise not just public support for far right extremist conspiratorial narratives, but to mobilise group members and the wider public for real-world action. Calls to action encompassed a range of options including simple non-compliance with public health mandates, stickering, erasing of QR codes, public demonstrations, the promotion of 'Freedom Rallies', mass civil disobedience, and violent revolution.

'Australians are beginning to rise… its only a matter of time before the masses understand who is responsible for genocide we are facing '

22 July 2021

'The White Race have always been warrior's. It's Time for this Warrior spirit to rise up again!'

13 May 2021

Protest and the 'Freedom Rally' movement The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a propaganda opportunity for far right extremist groups to appropriate Australian and international anti-lockdown protest movements. In a similar way to how the 'Reopen' movement in the USA has been appropriated by groups such as the Proud Boys (Crawford 2020), anti-lockdown protests in Sydney and Melbourne have allowed Australian far right extremists to align their narratives with public anxiety to spread anti-state messaging.

Protest increasingly grew as a dominant theme on Telegram across the sample period. References to anti-lockdown protests appeared in July 2021 and rose significantly after the July 24 anti-lockdown protest in Sydney. From this time until the end of the sample, a narrative centred on the theme of Australians fighting back against government overreach was a consistent feature online.

Posts and re-posts commented in support of strikes and protest by Australian truck drivers in August, and by construction workers and the CFMEU in September. There were repeated calls to mobilise construction workers 'an industry that is filled with young Aussie men' 8 August 2021) [1]. Local Australian-based protests were also promoted and celebrated, for instance the August 5 Melbourne 'Lockdowns Take Lives' rally.

'The government is scared… People are rising… Our time is now!!'

30 July 2021

Global anti-lockdown protest movements were enthusiastically supported online, as well as attended by some far right extremist individuals (McKenzie and Tozer 2021). From July through to September 2021 there were repeated calls to support and manage Australian chapters of the 'Worldwide Rally for Freedom' movement, with calls for 100,000-person marches in Australian cities.

Since 2020, 'Freedom Rallies' have appeared as a local grass-roots popular protest movement in the USA, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere. These protests appeal to and attract a diverse range of participants including the vaccine hesitant, wellness

1. This is furthered in early September, with the Queensland CFMEU 'fighting for freedom' contrasted with the Victorian CFMEU 'run by a communist'.

Figure 3.5.: Post from a far right Telegram account promoting the local organisation of an anti-lockdown `freedom rally'

communities, some religious denominations, and anti-government protest groups and agitators, including the far right (Roose 2021; Visontay 2021). Since late 2020 the Australian rallies have also attracted QAnon supporters (Gunia 2020). They provide an opportunity for a collection of different sectors of society holding similar grievances to rally behind a single cause (Önnerfors 2021; Liyanage 2021). These groups, while widely differing in ideology, all present the pandemic and public health responses as a conspiratorial plot used by the government against the people.

Since its inception in early 2020, the ‘Freedom Rally’ movement has broadened from a focus solely on the pandemic to increasingly adopt stronger political and anti-government undercurrents. Questioning the severity of COVID-19, rallies focus on a conspiratorial view that government is using public health measures to restrict liberties and control populations (Liyanage 2021; Ondrak and Wildon 2021). This narrative, while not usually incorporating racism or white supremacism, does align with far right extremist claims about the tyrannical nature of democracy and malevolence of the state and its apparatuses.

The global movement is organised through online peer-to-peer messaging platforms such as Telegram and Instagram. This allows public mobilisation to occur across borders and span wide segments of society. For example, the March 20, 2021, ‘Worldwide Rally for Freedom’ was arranged and disseminated by a conspiratorial and anti-Semitic QAnon-aligned protest group in Germany, resulting in 129 events and protests globally (Ondrak and Wildon 2021). Research on Facebook shows a similar alignment between pro-democracy Freedom Rallies and far right extremists in Sweden (Önnerfors 2021). Indeed, this dispersed and decentralised organisational structure, relying on peer-to-peer transmission via social media to attract local administrators and organisers in each location, resembles earlier QAnon ‘Save the Children’ rallies. Extremists in our sample promoted and advertised calls to run ‘Freedom Rallies’ in Australia.

Figure 3.6.: Post from far right Telegram channel depicting the desire to mainstream anti-government protest and rebellion

In Australia, emerging research suggests that explicitly far right extremist individuals and groups make up only one minor element of the 'Freedom Rally' movement. While there is evidence that some Australian rallies have been supported by far right extremist group members and QAnon supporters, the movement itself is wider than any single political ideology, and there is little evidence for the significant presence of white supremacist sentiment on the streets (McKenzie and Tozer 2021; Roose 2021). Analysis of placards from North America, Europe and Australia suggests six broad communities regularly attend (Liyanage 2021). In decreasing number are conspiracy theorists; pseudo-science enthusiasts; anti-lockdown freedom seekers; anti-democratic political radicals; spiritual and religious seekers; and QAnon supporters.

Rebellion Through July and August, posts concerned with COVID-19 disinformation, lockdowns, government overreach, and protest became the dominant topic discussed on the sampled channels. Coinciding with this shift was a hardening and radicalising of the language on extremist accounts, particularly in response to perceived government overreach. Far right extremists argued that this radicalisation of language was necessary because lockdowns had revealed the government's hidden agenda behind the 'plandemic'. 'Their [the government's] language is changing… the time for complacently is finished - we must now get prepared!' 30 July 2021).

'*The system is becoming scared. Revolution is coming!* ' 7 August 2021

'*We need to understand that all across the globe the civil war has already begun*' 8 May 2021

Far right extremist language continued to harden in response to harsher government responses to non-compliance with public health orders. Telegram posts from July onward showed emotive clips of protests contrasted with policing and military responses considered to be heavy handed. In response to a news report about the army patrolling lockdown areas until vaccine targets were met, it was claimed that 'Australians now need to continue to push back harder than ever… The way things are going our countries are a risk of a civil war between the vaxxed vs the un-vaxxed' 26 July 2021). Rather than regretting the increasing confrontation between public protesters and the state, far right extremists presented this as an opportunity to prove the validity of

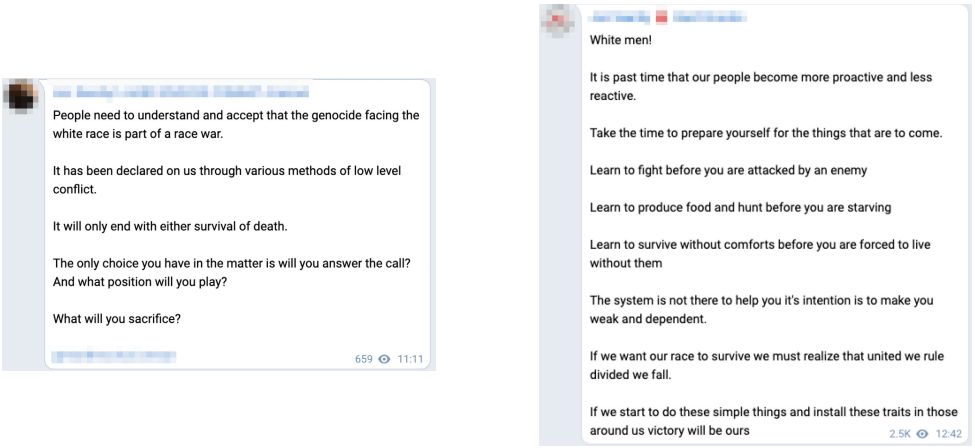


Figure 3.7.: Posts from a far right Telegram channel citing violence. These were posted in the midst of ongoing conspiratorial and anti-government anti-lockdown content

their anti-government narratives and mobilise a significant mass public response to accelerate governmental collapse.

This accelerationalist strategy of capitalising on social unrest and mass protest to destabilise the state is an established feature of far right extremists in Australia. Online, coded phrases such as 'white boy summer' or 'white boy winter' are used to refer to this hoped for mass extremist uprising, in a similar way to 'big luau', 'boogaloo', or 'cowabunga' in the United States.

Violence In parallel with the hardening of language about the need for anti-government protest, the sample showed an increase in implicit and explicit references to violence. For example: 'If you are aren't willing to die for what you believe in, you do not really believe it', 10 May 2021; and: 'If you aren't spending every waking moment working to bring down these mass murderers, you must start now!' Explicit calls for violence remained limited however, and when they did occur were usually framed as self defence against state aggression.

'Don't wait until you're the victim. Its fine to strike first ' 2 August 2021

Calls to violence were also apparent in relation to those Australians who decided to follow public health guidelines and, particularly, those who received vaccination. Posts suggested that those who do take the vaccine are 'stupid' and 'deserve to die'. Public health measures were in-turn represented as violence perpetrated by the state against its white population. For instance, Thomas Sewell stated from prison that 'Apparently there has been another Coronavirus outbreak, so I got my nostril raped. I did tell them I did not consent to my blood-brain barrier being violated…' (Telegram, 25 May 2021).

Overall, implicit or explicit calls for violence were usually made in response to perceived acts of aggression from outgroups such as the compliant public, the radical left, or politicians. For example, because of Kristina Keneally's attempts to proscribe far-right groups she 'is the real terrorist and should be treated as such' (30 April 2021). This parallels research from Gab showing that far right extremist calls for violence occurred mostly in response to oppositional narratives or the actions of opposite groups, and

Figure 3.8.: Audience poll from a far right Telegram channel citing an expectation for coming violence. The poll was viewed by c. 10,000, and answered c. 5,000 times

that violence was seen as legitimate in these circumstances (Guerin et al. 2021; Guerin et al. 2020).

Although it is unknown what the audiences interacting with these social media accounts think about the narratives portrayed in this case study, one piece of evidence does provide limited insight. An audience poll from a sampled Telegram channel discussing the 'most likely scenario for the next 5 years?' gives an induction of the prevalence of pro-violent sentiment among a far right extremist aligned audience. The poll was viewed about 10,000 times and answered about 5,000 times. The highest response, at 37 % of votes, was for 'Conflict and Segregation' as the most likely post-pandemic scenario. The second highest, 16%, was 'Civil War'. The third highest, 13%, was 'Race War'.

3.4. The Use of Conspiracy Theories

The use of conspiratorial narratives has been prevalent across the thematic framework discussed so far, and indeed has been central to the extreme right in Australia and elsewhere since well before the pandemic, as seen in Chapter 2.

'The Great Awakening is at hand, the great Reckoning will soon follow'

17 July 2021

The Australian far right extremist movement present the virus and the vaccine as a bioweapon designed to control the general population and the first steps in a coming totalitarianism and white genocide. This narrative fits a larger and well-established worldview in which the pandemic is but the latest and most aggressive strategy by which a shadowy elite attempt to control and weaken regular Australians by weaponizing fear about an invisible threat. According to this view, liberal democracy is an illusion orchestrated by hidden powers who control a system that uses globalisation and its offshoots such as feminism to enact white genocide (Buarque 2021).

Within right-wing extremist subcultures 'redpilling' is the process through which a person awakens from the illusions of modern life and becomes aware of this overarching and threatening conspiracy. Consequently, the awakened is illuminated to the truth and becomes ready to act against those supposedly perpetrating the conspiracy. This process has a strong revelatory aspect, and many far right extremists have described

their entry point into the movement as an almost spiritual 'awakening' (Schafer, Mullins, and Box 2014).

It is unsurprising that since its emergence in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had been fit into these preexisting conspiratorial frameworks, adding detail and immediacy, but not changing the narrative structure in any significant way. Yet at the same time, the pandemic has been innovatively used by far right extremists in several worrying ways. It has been used to connect their conspiratorial worldview with dramatic global events, and thus provide legitimisation. It has been used to align conspiratorial narratives with more mainstream public opinion. It has been used to spread far right extremist narratives more widely in attempt to mobilise new populations. Finally, by presenting the COVID-19 pandemic as a crisis manufactured by a malevolent out-group and in need of a dramatic and possibly violent solution, the pandemic has been used as an explicit call to anti-social action.

Globalising the narrative Early in the pandemic many Australians turned to far-fetched conspiracy theories for solutions to new uncertainties (Gunia 2020). These provided the advantage of presenting a global narrative linked to a host of local issues or grievances. This allows far right extremists to exploit local tensions by connecting their agenda with world affairs.

Connecting a global conspiratorial narrative with local on-the-ground issues, such as frustrations with public health mandates, has become a strategic opportunity for extremist groups to promote and popularise their narratives (Peucker et al. 2020). The international and ubiquitous nature of the global public health emergency gives credibility to far right extremist narratives for those believing in the conspiracy. The global scope provides a seemingly objective reality to these conspiratorial narratives, as well as a grandiose backdrop to the far right extremist political agenda. Connecting local grievances with an global crisis narrative is one way that terror groups radicalise and mobilise local actors to action (Sageman 2008).

Research in Victoria has demonstrated how conspiratorial thinking gives far right extremist aligned individuals a sense of moral and intellectual superiority and the perception of being part of an enlightened subgroup engaged in a global battle between forces of good and evil (Peucker et al. 2020). To be a white 'Aussie battler' takes on almost cosmic significance and leads to high motivation to struggle and fight in order to save society.

Mainstreaming the narrative Conspiracy theories form an alternative reality. This alternative reality serves as a framework under which multiple fringe movements, ideologies, and concerns can be mobilised.

Historically, conspiracy theories have been popular during times of catastrophic or unusual events needing ready explanation (Leach and Probyn 2021). Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a host of interrelated conspiracy theories have emerged or been grafted onto existing extremist movements such as QAnon. These include narratives about the 'plandemic', anti-vaccination, the dangers of 5G, and the cult of

Trumpism (LaFrance 2020; Ahmed et al. 2020). Emerging research suggests that the uncertainty, stress, anxiety, and depression caused by the pandemic has exacerbated the volume and reach of crisis narratives and conspiracy theories online (Brennen et al. 2020; Shahsavari, Holur, Wang, et al. 2020; Allington 2021; Allington, Buarque, and Barker Flores 2021).

The pandemic has created an alignment between anti-vaccination actors and wider conspiratorial narratives spreading disinformation (McGowan 2021a; Bruns, Harrington, and Hurcombe 2020; Blakkarly 2020). This has allowed the pandemic to become an 'umbrella' beneath which a host of pre-existing and contradictory conspiracy theories can coexist. This apparent interconnection between multiple narratives gives the impression that everything fits together in some mysterious fashion, further confirming the conspiratorial worldview.

The conglomerating nature of COVID-19 conspiracy theories has granted a flexibility to the pandemic narrative promulgated by far right extremists. By offering answers to a host of questions and concerns, extreme conspiratorial narratives appeal to a wider set of social groups not traditionally aligned with the extreme right.

Presenting a crisis, posing a solution Conspiracy theories have been central to the rise and existence of extremist and violent extremist movements, past and present (Berger 2018). By popularising a narrative that claims to reveal hidden truths to an illuminated elect, they erode trust and confidence in established centres of authority, including government, the media, traditional religion, or the sciences (Räikkä 2009; Sunstein and Vermeule 2009). This makes conspiracy theories useful in spurring movements that are fundamentally hostile to a dehumanised other, and that justify radical solutions to a perceived crisis (Lee 2017). Indeed, research suggests that 46 % of lone violent actors engaged with conspiracy theories (Rottweiler and Gill 2020).

The COVID-19 conspiracy theory promulgated by the extreme right online outlines a crisis that has been experienced universally (the pandemic and state responses) and then goes on to provide a solution in the form of out-group othering and anti-government struggle. A strict in-group versus out-group is constructed in which malevolent hidden elites are contrasted with honest and down-to-earth white Australian males (Peucker et al. 2020). Violent action against the government and other out-groups is justified either through their claimed orchestration of the original conspiracy, or their acquiescence with the current deceptive status quo.

By presenting the crisis as caused or exacerbated by the actions of a malevolent out-group, conspiracy theories justify an implicit solution by neutering or removing the out-group. This narrative fits the 'crisis, solution, justification' construct used to explain how extremist narratives present a crisis and solution to mobilise individuals and groups to violent action (Berger 2018).

4. Moderation

In this chapter, we investigate the ideas of what moderation and, especially, effective moderation may have or mean in the context of online social media and the increase in online conspiratorial and far right extremist narratives. We find that moderation, while necessary to fight spam and illegal content, is slow to respond and insufficient to address the social vulnerabilities generated by the spread of conspiratorial and anti-establishment discourse.

Traditionally moderation has been viewed as 'damage'. The old adage is 'The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it' (Elmer-Dewitt 1993). Censorship (moderation) has historically been seen as damage, as inconvenience, or as technical disturbance. Rules can only be enforced to the point where users then stop using the site. However, humans are endlessly creative. We see countless examples of users finding workarounds to allow them to continue to use or benefit from sites despite moderation and rules.

The dataset showed repeated uses of the word '*SS'. The abbreviation 'SS' is frequently used on platforms such as Gab and 8kun to reference 'Schutzstaffel'[1]. We were expecting to see this word used in association with anti-Semitic slurs and far right extremists. However, when we visualised term-occurrences in our anti-Semitic lexical dispersion plots, this term and only this term had high frequency in comments from Entertainment channels on YouTube. These channels are not hotbeds of Nazi ideology. Instead, they are frequented by people who are used to the brute moderation (and subsequent suspension of accounts) of the word 'ass' on popular gaming platforms aimed at a target audience under 18 years of age. These users moderate their the online activity and use '*ss' instead.

These behaviours transcend platform moderation guidelines. On YouTube despite any indication of attempts to moderate the word 'ass', certain users continue to self-censor their language. This use of '*ss' is not objectionable, problematic, or anti-Semitic in any way, save for our prior expectations shaped by toxic social media sites. The above example shows how users' behaviour is affected by moderation – without changing their fundamental communications.

Moderation is a tool a site owner can use, be they a small community message board or a technology giant like Twitter, to enforce their view of what behaviours are allowed on the platform. This enforcement can be used to create and sustain a community by setting and enforcing norms.

1. Hitler's secret police responsible for atrocities during World War Two

4.1. Moderation on Twitter and YouTube

Moderation can be a useful tool in shaping a community. Automated moderation at scale, however, is more effective against spam than concepts. Language is dynamic and creative, particularly in regards to persuasion, communication, and marketing. When people seek to spread ideas they can be endlessly creative in how they use terms, phrasing, intents, and ultimately language. Currently, computers are still not able to fully understand the nuances of language. Unfortunately, keyword matching, machine learning and 'natural language processing' remains the core mechanism of automated moderation. Spam, being low-cost, low-effort, and computer produced is much easier than human communication to moderate using automation (Gorwa, Binns, and Katzenbach 2020).

Moderation can be effective against topics with stable associated vocabularies such as racial slurs and spam. Far right extremist and conspiratorial ideas, language, and referential content are inherently fluid and designed to avoid moderation. Automated moderation of this content is more challenging (Stewart 2021; Gillespie 2020).

Moderating extremist and conspiratorial narratives always occurs after the fact. It is impossible to predict the combination of terms users in these communities will adopt each day. As was seen with the Islamic State beheading videos and Brenton Tarrant's livestream of the Christchurch terrorist attack, once this type of content is circulating in the digital environment it is incredibly difficult, if not impossible to remove access. Complicating the issue further, the use of humour and irony that is so central to 'shit-posting' tied to far right extremist communities online, requires nuanced understanding to identify when comments and content represent a risk and/or threat of violence.

The statistically significant increase in QAnon content (Figure 2.1b) demonstrates these challenges of automated and human moderation strategies. QAnon first emerged in 2017 (Tian 2021). However, QAnon content was not systematically banned by either YouTube or Twitter until October 2020. By this time QAnon content had already become highly engaged, spreading effectively across both platforms, exposing new audiences to conspiratorial beliefs and narratives.

4.1.1. Moderation takes a community

The offensiveness of ideas, concepts, and language is culturally specific. There exists no broad, world-wide consensus about when moderation of these discussions should occur. There are many different views in terms of harms, free speech, prior restraint, and healthy democratic debate (Llansó 2020). Even worse, bad-faith efforts on the part of some users claim the protections of American 'free speech' while denying the same defences to social media platforms and other users who do not share their ideology.

Effective moderation is most likely to occur by users familiar with and/or engaged in a given community. This problem of scale may therefore not result in appropriate moderation on global platforms such as YouTube and Twitter. One example from

our data emerged from a YouTube channel associated with a 'alt-right' influencer. The channel owner actively moderated comments and reminded users to restrict conversations pointing them to alternative platforms for more 'robust' communications. This channel owner's moderation was *effective for their purposes*. Their efforts shaped their community's norms and prevented outright breaches of the YouTube Community Guidelines.

Moderation was effective in shaping this channel owner's community. However, the result remains problematic in the context of online conspiratorial and anti-establishment narratives and beliefs. These moderation attempts stand in stark contrast to other channels using YouTube purely as a video archive. As demonstrated below, the lack of engagement, community management, and moderation of the associated communities affords opportunities for far right extremist and conspiratorial narratives to take root.

4.1.2. Moderation within Twitter

Twitter uses an 'algorithmic timeline'[2] to optimise engagement on their site. Algorithmic timelines have been shown to consistently correlate with an amplification of misleading and conspiratorial content to novel audiences (Thomas 2021). User engagement on Twitter has been shown to be influenced by users of opposing positions 'shouting' at each other. Research conducted by Roth (2021) indicates how a right-leaning skew on Twitter is generated by ideologically contrasting content:

> [T]his could mean that right-leaning posts on Twitter successfully spark more outrage, resulting in amplification. Perhaps Twitter's algorithm issue is tied to promoting toxic tweeting more than a specific political bias.

An oppositional tweet generates outrage that in turn drives engagement and further hostile commentary. The important aspect here is the algorithmic amplification of the heated argument as opposed to the specifics of the content.

4.1.3. Failures of moderation on YouTube

YouTube operates as a hub for the storage and dissemination of video content and as an open-ended environment aimed at generating a sense of community to drive engagement (Shifman 2012). These two aspects of YouTube provide diverse user experiences that require distinct moderation strategies.

Our data collection collected comments from over 15,000 Sky News Australia videos starting in mid 2020[3]. Sky News Australia uses its YouTube channel as a repository for its video content and we saw little evidence of Sky News Australia proactively engaging with users on their Channel or anyone moderating the comments on their videos.It appears that updates to YouTube's community guidelines are not automatically applied

2. Rather than showing the most recent posts first, (reverse chronological timeline) an algorithmic timeline uses computer generated heuristics to rank/show users posts that they are likely to engage with.

3. We had intended to collect comments across the full period, but the YouTube comment API failed silently – and we were not able to include these four million comments in our larger quantitative data analysis. Despite this error, we did engage in qualitative examination of this content stream.

Figure 4.1.: Meade (2021) reports in The Guardian (with embedded video) about Fox News' coverage of Sky News Australia's suspension.

to existing comments. This means some comments posted prior to such changes may currently violate present guidelines.

Placing these videos in an environment largely free from moderation affords users with a motive, time, and opportunity to propagate offensive and hate-filled content. While the majority of comments on videos hosted on Sky News Australia have no replies, a number of comments generate significant dialogue between users. One of the longer 'reply threads' in our data is 470 comments long on a video discussing accusations of American election fraud. This comment thread has since been removed. However, it reflects one example of the multitude of videos hosted in largely non-moderated spaces on YouTube channels that provide opportunities to spread conspiratorial and far right extremist narratives and beliefs (Waldek 2021).

This problem is not limited to Sky News Australia – it is a challenge facing any major channel with more comments than moderation capability. Some channels such as ABC have therefore chosen to disable comments. Unfortunately, even when comments have been disabled, we still see significant commentary of mainstream media videos on niche social media platforms where there is far less moderation.

4.1.4. The appeal of offensive content

On 4 August 2021, YouTube suspended the Sky News Australia channel for one week in response to its hosting of anti-vaccine COVID-19 conspiratorial videos (Taylor 2021). The removal process of offending videos was applied inconsistently. The accessibility of video content referencing COVID-19 conspiratorial narratives and beliefs was largely

unharmed. As the Guardian reported many videos remained until pointed out by journalists (Taylor 2021).

The ongoing presence of controversial and offensive videos is particularly problematic given the high engagement of Australian users with Sky News Australia: 'It was recently revealed that Sky News Australia has become one of the country's most engaging news brands across multiple digital platforms and is reaching more than a third of all Australians each month' (Sky News Australia 2021).

Sky News Australia exemplifies the challenge of moderation on these large networks. From May 2020 to Jan 2021, Sky News Australia received over 4 million comments which passed YouTube's automated community guidelines checking. When these videos generate hundreds of comments, human moderation becomes logistically difficult.

YouTube remains a preeminent destination on all social media sites. As it continues to grow, the above problems will only compound. No effective automated moderation techniques currently exist to curtail far right extremist and conspiratorial narratives on this platform. Increasing demands for automated moderation is not a solution. The problem is that comments can have unlimited reach with limited consequences. In addition the driving role played by engagement on these social media platforms rewards offensive and shocking content.

4.2. Ideas towards effective moderation

Twitter's safety rules and YouTube's Community Guidelines have tempered extreme speech. Effective moderation on these platforms relies heavily on human moderators. This reliance on humans takes a mental health toll on those moderating offensive posts and comments, further supporting the push towards automated moderation (Gillespie 2020).

Regardless of the size and technical sophistication of moderation operations it remains impossible to eliminate engagement with offensive content. Comments and tweets, especially when they are offensive, generate engagement – ultimately the desired reward for both content creator and the social media platform. Moderation is always in competition with engagement. Recent public scrutiny of Facebook's moderation of users and content on its platform are indicative of these challenges (Stokel-Walker 2021).

Companies are worried about user reactions to moderation. They fear that stopping users from participating in certain conversations may result in reduced engagement on their site (LaFrance 2021). The centrality of user engagement creates an explicit tension between the profit responsibilities of publicly traded companies and the social responsibilities of moderation.

There remains significant need to remove dangerous and harmful content. The Christchurch initiative reaffirmed the important role legislation can play in driving moderation efforts. However, automated moderation strategies are only ever postdictive and partial. Implementations can also have unintended consequences as effective moderation

can move content and users towards niche and unmoderated platforms and digital spaces.

Social media allows the mass broadcast of any idea that comes into our minds. Interesting and emerging strategies have emerged from discussions around decentralisation and the breakup of social media platforms (De Vries 2018; Hassan et al. 2021; Raman et al. 2019). Bogost (2021) frames the problem as being one of the reach of content rather than of the content itself. One way to limit reach, for example, is by placing limits on the number of retweets or comments users can make. This limitation has already occurred in relation to the number of words users can tweet:

> ... [M]ore meaningful, constraints on internet services, by contrast, is both aesthetically and legally compatible with the form and business of the technology industry. To constrain the frequency of speech, the size or composition of an audience, the spread of any single speech act, or the life span of such posts is entirely accordant with the creative and technical underpinning of computational media. It should be shocking that you pay no mind to recomposing an idea so it fits in 280 characters, but that you'd never accept that the resulting message might be limited to 280 readers or 280 minutes. And yet, nothing about the latter is fundamentally different from the former.

As noted previously, moderation strategies including those proposed by Bogost, impact on 'engagement' and are problematic for global social media platforms. There are however, other useful examples of effective moderation strategies within 'Alternative Social Media' (see Zulli, Liu, and Gehl 2020). These could be explored to identify strategies and tools that help to facilitate healthier social media environments. Mirroring the importance of civic education and participation in the development of social cohesion; providing users with the skills, knowledge, and ability to engage and inform social media platform policy is one way to address the spread of conspiratorial and anti-establishment narratives.

5. Conclusion

This project examined the spread of far right extremist and conspiratorial thinking in Australian online discourse in the context of COVID-19 and the opportunities the pandemic has provided far right extremists. The findings identified two key concerns. The first is a statistically significant increase in far right extremist and conspiratorial narratives in public sentiment online. This growth represents only a very small part of broader public online discourse. However, once conspiratorial narratives are embedded in public discourse they provide challenges to social norms and governance. The second concern is the alignment of conspiratorial thinking with movements and groups not traditionally associated with far right extremists. The pandemic has provided a unique opportunity for far right extremists to capitalise on public fear, alienation, and anti-government sentiment for purposes of recruitment and mobilisation to violence.

However an attempt to understand or address the first concern (the growth of conspiratorial narratives) through the lens of the second (far right extremism itself), risks further alienating and hardening marginalised communities. This process has occurred previously during early government approaches to preventing Islamist violent extremism.

COVID-19 and far right extremism: In Australia and internationally, the global health crisis has provided far right extremists with a unique opportunity. It has allowed them to peg their extremist messaging to a real-world crisis, to internationalise their narrative, to align their concerns with wider public sentiment, and to potentially mobilise new communities. This mobilisation has also benefited from the real-world networking opportunities afforded through various protest movements. Our findings indicated a shift in far right extremist narratives to incorporate a stronger focus on Australian state governments, in contrast to their previous focus on federal government. We also noted a hardening of language within far right extremist online communications about the need for anti-government protest as well as an increase in implicit and explicit references to violence. Despite this alignment, an examination of broader public online sentiment indicates the majority of Australians remain unaware and uninterested in explicit far right extremist propaganda.

Conspiratorial narratives: There exists a statistically significant increase in conspiratorial narratives found in online public communications. While this spread was small, this finding is concerning, as once conspiratorial thinking entered into public discourse it often proves to be enduring. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated public health responses provided a receptive audience for this type of conspiratorial and anti-authority thinking.

5.1. Ways Forward

5.1.1. Moderation

Online moderation is necessary but insufficient. It has limited use when removing problematic speech, disinformation, misinformation, and conspiratorial narratives. Human creativity means that those seeking to discuss and engage with extremist and conspiratorial narratives will find novel ways to work around the distant and context-free online moderation of different social media platforms.

The critical issue is that mainstream social media sites are optimised around promoting hyper-engagement of their users for the benefit of their advertisers. As explored in this report the prioritisation of engagement results in a proliferation of shocking and offensive content. However, without an industry agreed ethical code that facilitates independent research on social media platforms answering these questions with rigour is impossible.

Opportunities exist to change the default reach of posts and social norms of these platforms. Alongside content moderation through machine learning and offshore third party moderation providers, efforts to mitigate harmful speech could address the algorithmic timeline. These strategies could focus on reevaluating the assumption that all messages and all advertising in the online environment should have a global audience by default. Other artificial limitations such as the number of posts a user can make or the reach of posts as detailed in the chapter on moderation provides a starting point for future research and discussion.

All of these points are opportunities to generate further discussion. Technology can not fully solve social problems including those of social cohesion, however it can provide mitigation strategies and contribute to solutions (Hobart 2021). Opening up discussions around the balance between business models that prioritise engagement, opportunities for decentralised and human-scale online communities, and opportunity for reducing the spread of polarised and offensive communication remains a useful starting point.

5.1.2. Conspiratorial thinking

Conspiracy theories provide simplistic answers to complex problems such as the current global health crisis, and present experts and traditional systems of authority and government as malevolent and untrustworthy. Belief in a conspiracy theory is not a reliable indicator of an acceptance of far right extremism, but conspiratorial thinking is prevalent within far right extremist (and many other extremist) movements, and may provide a vulnerability for pathways into these.

While conspiratorial thinking is detrimental and corrosive to liberal democracy, in sum there are three qualities of conspiratorial thinking that make it particularly concerning for social cohesion:

First, conspiracy theories concerning COVID-19 present a global narrative that can be linked to a host of diverse local issues and grievances. This allows far right extremists to exploit local tensions for their broader political agenda by connecting their narratives with world affairs.

Second, conspiracy theories form an alternative reality. This alternative reality serves as a framework under which multiple fringe movements, ideologies, and concerns can be mobilised. This allows far right extremists to mobilise among new social groups not traditionally receptive to their narratives or aims.

Third, by presenting the crisis as caused or exacerbated by the actions of a sinister and malevolent out-group, conspiracy theories justify an implicit solution in neutering or removing the out-group. This can present pathways towards anti-establishment civic dissent and violence.

5.1.3. Public communications

This report found a statistically significant increase in far right extremist content online, however it notes that this remains a tiny proportion of the overall posts on mainstream media. This is a positive finding that demonstrates the small scale of online engagement with far right extremist content. As we saw, far right extremist language largely rose and fell in line with media discussion of related real-world events. However, and in contrast, conspiratorial language, while still appearing in low volume, demonstrated a more steady presence and rise over time. In line with wider research on conspiratorial narratives, we found that once having entered into online public discourse, conspiratorial language remained.

These findings create a challenge for public communications. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for far right extremists to bring together different communities under a shared narrative that is suspicious and dismissive of public health measures and the governments that implement them. This alignment is one of convenience and opportunity rather than one founded on substantial social and ideological connections. Public communications that conflate far right extremism with broader community dissent may reinforce far right extremist conspiratorial narratives and harden existing societal polarisation. This in turn would reduce opportunities for positive discussion that acknowledges the anxieties and fears of non-far right extremist communities.

The pandemic has created opportunities for far right extremists to broadcast their narratives to broader subculture identities built around anti-government and anti-establishment narratives as well as opposition to public health measures such as vaccination. People engage with these narratives because they provide simple answers and clearly identify an 'other' who can become the focus of blame. Conspiratorial narratives are quick to position government and authority figures within this out-group. Communications that describe those who disobey public health orders in order to engage in civil protest as far right extremists may reinforce the very alignment sought by actual far right extremist groups.

Consistent public acknowledgement of different groups holding alternative perspectives can provide the necessary framework for proactive public engagement with marginalised subcultures. Politicising and demonising public non-compliance with health orders may lead to the further alienation of dissenting groups, pushing them towards the political fringes inhabited by actual anti-state extremists. One way to prevent this is to move away from polarising communications that subsume public discontent and fears around COVID-19 under a violent extremist lens.

Engagement strategies that provide opportunities for these communities to express their fears and anxieties may help in the increasing understanding. State government programs that proactively engage with active and outspoken dissenting/angry citizenship are well placed to provide preventative support for those impacted by conspiratorial and anti-establishment movements due to the current global health crisis, or who become engaged with far right extremist movements.

Mainstream media plays a role. Whether consumed through traditional means or through social media, it shapes discussion about the events and crises that impact Australians. Mainstream media reporting acts as a signpost for users about far right extremist, conspiratorial thinking, and social media spaces where there is less moderation and oversight. This is not to suggest that journalistic coverage of related events is not critical, but rather that opportunities exist to continue ongoing and important discussions around the ethics and responsibilities of mainstream media journalism.

Societal crises come and go. Social cohesion and resilience measure how well we as a society are prepared for these crises, and how successfully we respond in ways that promote the mediation of difference and positive pro-social solutions. The processes involved in building social cohesion require robust feedback mechanisms. In order to address the impact that COVID-19 has had on the growth of conspiratorial narratives, communities need to be provided with opportunities to robustly express their concerns and dissent in ways that prevent their further alignment with far right extremist movements.

Appendices

A. Method

This report explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australian social media discourse to examine trends in the spread of far right extremist narratives from January 2019 to September 2021.[1]

The study included three major components:

- Hypothesis-driven quantitative analysis to explore the possible increase in the presence of far right extremist words and phrases within broad online Australian public sentiment between 8 January 2019 to 8 January 2021. Two social media platforms were selected – YouTube and Twitter.
- A case-study examination of posts from Telegram and Instagram to understand how far right extremists in Australia have used COVID-19 for propaganda, engagement, and recruitment purposes.
- Qualitative analysis of collected YouTube and Twitter posts to discuss trends relating to the moderation of extremist and offensive content.

A.1. Quantitative data collection

The selection of Twitter and YouTube was in part informed by expedience[2]. The pragmatics of our broad statistical study required us to use platforms that offered broad, programmatic, and legal access to their data. The large Australian presence on YouTube and Twitter also informed our selection of these platforms. The collection of large amounts of data required extensive automation for collection and preparation[3].

Neither Twitter or YouTube are entirely representative of Australian public sentiment on- or offline. However, according to Civic Web Media (2021), Twitter and YouTube remain popular mainstream social media sites within Australia. Therefore, to explore broad online trends within Australian social media we collected millions of tweets and comments over two years. The high volume and breadth of posts collected affords statistically useful and interesting insights into Australian social media use.

1. Data collection was conducted under Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee number 52020556522205.

2. Despite several conversations with Facebook, we were unable to secure permission to conduct research on Facebook's products at the scale of data collection this study required. Furthermore, Gab's terms of service have changed to forbid any 'means to access the Website for any purpose including monitoring [or to] use any manual process to monitor or copy any of the material on the Website.' (GAB AI INC 2020)

3. using SciPy's Natural Language Processing framework – the means by which a block of text is cleaned, segmented into individual words, and normalised so that analysis can be performed

Table A.1.: Derived location of all tweets in our dataset

Tweets	**Profile Derived Location**
82 274	Australian Capital Territory, Australia
947 835	New South Wales, Australia
12 103	Northern Territory, Australia
445 534	Queensland, Australia
175 613	South Australia, Australia
43 656	Tasmania, Australia
921 704	Victoria, Australia
249 653	Western Australia, Australia
993 269	No state given, Australia
3 871 641	Sum of 1% sample of all Australian Tweets above
1 755 886	Re-tweets/quote-tweets

A.1.1. Twitter

Twitter, in one public conception of the platform, is where people go to argue politics and discuss world events (Rees 2021). Twitter has been described as providing a, 'constant background roar [with] the global id in full throat,' into world events and trending and engaging content (Stross 2015). Taking a broad sampling of Australian twitter users allowed us to explore the change in the use of terms on Twitter to discuss trends in the spread of far right extremist content online.

The Twitter search[4] used two parameters:

- `sample: 1` which requested only 1% of tweets that matched the specified query; and
- `profile_country: au` which restricted collected tweets to users who had set their biographical locations to a place inside Australia.

We purchased data matching these parameters across a two year date range from 8 January 2019 through 8 January 2021. This period included the Christchurch terror attack, the first wave of COVID-19, global Black Lives Matter protests, and the US Capitol riots.

The download of 1% of Australian tweets provided 3,871,641 tweets (see A.1). We also included all retweets[5] giving a total of 5,627,527 tweets. We did not constrain our download by any keyword searches, and so this download is a representative sample of the roughly four hundred million tweets from self-identified Australians tweeted during January 2019 and January 2021.

4. Downloaded via Historical PowerTrack before the academic Application Programming Interface (API) was released

5. The three million tweets also contained over a million embedded tweets lacking locations. We included embedded re/quote-tweets because of their appearance in Australian users timelines.

Table A.2.: Counts of Videos and Comments from YouTube videos

Channel Name	Category	# Videos	# Comments
(An alt-right entertainment channel)	Alt Right	66	621
Jalals	Entertainment	3	29 720
KjraGaming	Entertainment	496	39 316
LazarBeam	Entertainment	262	5 571 897
Nat's What I Reckon	Entertainment	55	24 129
Ozzy Man Reviews	Entertainment	181	393 084
RackaRacka	Entertainment	38	140 363
Robot Head	Entertainment	26	73 628
The Voice Australia	Entertainment	493	98 507
7NEWS Australia	News/Politics	8107	507 980
(A far-left news channel)	News/Politics	17	501
Guardian Australia	News/Politics	110	3593
Sky News Australia	News/Politics	15 698	4 068 711
thejuicemedia	News/Politics	36	71 663
ACL – Australian Christian Lobby	Religion	191	22 490
Hillsong Worship	Religion	102	41 440
OnePath Network	Religion	179	57 630
AFL	Sport	1487	112 704
Cricket.com.au	Sport	2726	829 098
Chloe Ting	Wellness	157	874 597
Sarah's Day	Wellness	110	143 358

A.1.2. YouTube

People post comments on YouTube for a number of reasons and in many guises: to respond to the video, to engage in a channel's community, to copy and paste large blocks of text [6], to annoy, harass, solicit, and post spam. These behaviours reflect YouTube's dual purpose: an archive for videos, and a social media site where community forms around a given channel (Waldek 2021).

Subscriber count and upload rates were used as selection criteria for most of the YouTube channels in this study. We initially intended to capture more channels' comments during data collection but many mainstream sites have disabled comments. Using this selection criteria, we then aimed to ensure the majority of the channels reflected a broad sampling across YouTube's own internal channel categories. These categories included entertainment, sport, gaming, news, fashion & beauty, and comedy. The aim was to include channels that were representative of mainstream Australian YouTube consumption and engagement. In addition, we included some smaller channels whose content has been associated with controversial topics. We do not assert that any of the channel owners selected for the purposes of this study are themselves part of far right extremist or conspiratorial communities.

6. See the slang term 'copypasta' defined as: 'a block of text that is copied and pasted across the Internet by individuals through online forums and social networking websites. ... [T]hey are used to annoy other users and disrupt online discourse' (Wikipedia contributors 2021).

To protect privacy, YouTube does not offer users the ability to indicate their public location, nor does it offer the ability to download comments absent a video reference. We therefore only selected Australian channels to maximise the likelihood of the data being drawn from an Australian user base.

Using the YouTube data API we collected comments from videos posted on these 21 channels (see Table A.2) over a two year period (08 January 2019 - 08 January 2021). Our collection criteria resulted in a final download of 13,105,030 comments.

A.2. Case study data collection

The case study presents a thematic analysis of the pandemic-related themes used by Australian far right extremists through 2021. We drew on data from a selection of online sources including Telegram and Instagram accounts, far right extremist online news, and a literature review of existing research and high quality journalistic sources. A qualitative thematic analysis was applied to this material to provide an account of how far right extremists have appropriated the pandemic to their cause. The data examined included:

- Published research and high quality journalistic accounts on the ways in which far right extremists are co-opting the pandemic and associated public health orders to spread their narratives, both globally and in Australia.
- Public-facing 2021 Telegram accounts of prominent far right extremist groups: the National Socialist Network (NSN), and the European Australian Movement (EAM).
- Public-facing 2020 and 2021 Telegram accounts of key far right extremist group leaders including Thomas Sewell, Blair Cottrell, and emerging personalities.
- Instagram pages associated with the 2021 Sydney anti-lockdown 'freedom movement', as well as associated militant anti-lockdown personalities.
- The online far right extremist mediasphere in Australia through 2021 including 'XYZ news' and 'The Uncuckables' YouTube channel[7].

Content was collected mostly throughout 2021, including some older posts promoted and re-posted by users. Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube content was in most cases collected via screenshots or download within narrow time windows prior to sites being shut down by the owners or by the platform administrators. The data collection period covered two periods: the time prior to the 26 June 2020 lockdown in greater Sydney,

7. XYZ news is an online news site 'dedicated to free speech and Western restoration'. The site collects articles about national socialism and Western chauvinism, and includes a steady stream of COVID-19 conspiracies, COVID-19 disinformation, anti-government agitation, and the promotion of COVID related rallies and protests. The Uncuckables is a YouTube channel dedicated to panel-style discussions with Australian far right extremist leaning or aligned personalities.

and then during the lockdown period and associated anti-lockdown protest movement. No data was collected after 9 September 2021[8].

A.3. Statistical analysis

This project explored broad trends of Australian use of social media in order to examine the 'creeping threat' identified in our prior work (see Ballsun-Stanton, Waldek, and Droogan 2020). To plot the change of use in specific words and phrases, in a statistically valid manner, we developed a comprehensive list of far right extremist and conspiratorial phrases relevant during 2019-2021. Jargon used by far right extremists online is dynamic, with our list of associated words and phrases changing over time.

A.3.1. Wordlists

We expanded and updated wordlists compiled during our previous project[9]. The new word lists were created according to the following categories:

- The far right extremist,
- Hate speech,
- Anti-Semitism,
- Islamophobia,
- Anti-LGBTQI+,
- The Far Left,
- Racism,
- Misogyny,
- Anti-Aboriginal,
- Anti-Asian,
- Conspiratorial thinking, and
- COVID-19 conspiratorial thinking.

The wordlists represent a comprehensive set of words and phrases specific to a particular subculture. The overall wordlist was then separated into four unique categories: unique far right extremist words, unique conspiratorial words, unique QAnon words, unique COVID-19 conspiratorial words. We selected these four broader thematic categories to reflect distinctive words and phrases associated with far right extremism and with conspiracy theories. We were then able to clearly distinguish narratives associated with COVID-19, QAnon conspiracy theories, and broader conspiratorial language. These four categories formed the basis of the statistical analysis.

We did not explore pro-, anti-, or neutral discussion around these categories. Instead, we looked for the presence of these words in any given post. Users often make the

8. Telegram and Instagram material was captured by screenshot. Six Telegram channels were recorded in their entirety between the date ranges presented in the table (294 screenshots).Three Instagram accounts were followed and captured selectively (55 screenshots).

9. There may be more incidence of discussion of far right extremist terms on the platforms. We chose words that were unique to these categories with little possibility of confusion into other languages, topics, or uses.

same point numerous times in a given comment. To ensure each post was only counted once, we counted posts rather than the frequency of possibly-repeated words.

Qualitative analysis was conducted on sample conversations from YouTube and Twitter. Reading tweets and comments showed that these words are indeed characteristic of the trends in the labelled categories and contextualised our analysis. It ensured that there were no other major competing uses of these terms that did not relate to the categorised trends. Words used in other contexts were removed from the wordlists [10].

A.3.2. Statistics

We applied statistical investigation in order to attempt to falsify our hypotheses. We investigated if the trend of term use[11] and the broad use of terms across the data collection time-period was positive, neutral, or negative. We explored if these trends could be identified and differentiated from chance.

We engaged a statistician who proposed plotting linear regressions[12] of the logarithm-scaled[13] word in comment/tweet frequency versus time.

These plots then visualised the trends in the most appropriate and clear manner. A well-fitting linear regression on log-scale data shows that the rate of growth is increasing. We validated these linear regressions using a smoothed (LOWESS) curve, to make sure that the data supported the linear trend. All claims of statistical significance in this report were checked to ensure that their p-values were less than 0.05.

A.4. Thematic analysis

This thematic framework was devised using two methods: one based upon the literature review, the other on a grounded theory approach to data analysis. In the first case, a set of common themes were identified in the review of literature relating to how far right extremists use COVID-19 and the pandemic in their communication strategies. In the second case, a grounded approach was adopted, whereby new themes not previously found in the literature review but that appeared in the data sample were identified and added to the framework.

10. For example, 'Abe', was initially included in the unique far right extremist categorisation because of its associated on platforms such as Gab and 8kun with an anti-Semitic slur. The prevalence of this word was shown to be connected with a Hindi retort-starter 'shouted' at members of opposing nation's teams in YouTube cricket videos. While offensive, 'Abe' in this context was therefore removed as an indicator of anti-Semitic and far right extremist conversation.

11. a single count of a term is when a word or phrase from the wordlist occurs one or more times in an individual comment or tweet.

12. A regression is a statistical model comparing how well actual data-points fit a theoretical line drawn through their 'middle'. A 'good fit' means that the line summarises or predicts the points well. A *linear* regression models how well the plotted points fit to a *straight* line. When a linear regression is fitted against a logarithmic scale, it demonstrates an *exponential* relationship. A positive relationship shows that as the independent variable increases (in our case, time), the dependent variable also increases (comments/tweets containing words from our categories). Being exponential, in our case, shows an increasing rate of growth over time.

13. in log-10 scale, 1 post containing a word = 1, 10 posts containing a word = 2, 100 posts containing a word = 3. This scaling was done to reduce the extremes in the graph caused by news mentions.

The framework was then organised to relate specific topics under key themes. In this way, the review provides a set or high-level 'organising themes', for instance 'exploiting the pandemic to serve inclusion/exclusion agendas', under which are placed specific topics found in the Australian far right extremist sample, for instance 'anti-Semitism'.

A.5. Limitations of the project

Data problems with the YouTube Data API The use of YouTube as a video archive by Sky News Australia saw them upload 15,000 videos between May 2020 and January 2021. The sheer scale of videos uploaded by Sky News Australia meant that it went over the internal capacity provided by YouTube's Data API. As a consequence, collection of Sky News Australia data was curtailed. The final data-set included eight months of video content and comments. We therefore made the decision to exclude the Sky News Australia channel in the quantitative analysis. The comments on Sky News Australia were however incorporated in the qualitative analysis.

The limitations of the YouTube Data API meant that downloaded replies to comments only returned the five most recent replies. This constraint excluded the content of long-running conversations in YouTube comments. We downloaded 10,600,296 top-level comments on YouTube videos across the 21 channels. However, there were theoretically 4,672,087 replies. The final data set only includes 2,504,734 due to the limitations of the YouTube API.

Social network gender bias Analysis of the large-scale data from Twitter and YouTube indicated the presence of a gendered bias (Horvát and Hargittai 2021). The findings in this report are therefore skewed towards a male user base. Whether that skew is due to distinct gender participation in these spaces or to users within far right extremist and conspiratorial online communities is not answerable by this research.

Thematic analysis limitations The case study observations cannot be generalised out to the wider Australian population. The case study provides a snapshot of far right extremist material associated with established or emerging groups and public individuals, primarily on Telegram and Instagram. This thematic analysis does not measure how successful, popular, or effective this far right extremist online propaganda is among the general public, nor how representative it is of larger Australian far right extremist trends.

A.6. Anonymisation

To comply with the terms established in the ethics agreement covering this project, we have in most cases removed personally identifiable information. Names of the selected YouTube channels have been removed for those channels with smaller follower-counts (under 90,000). We made one exception for the Guardian Australia because of its status as a mainstream media news organisation.

In the case study, only the names of well-known and established Australian far right extremist groups and personalities have been retained, with all other identifying information removed.

Quotes from social media sites have been transcribed verbatim and then edited to comply with ethics. Most original grammatical and spelling mistakes have been retained in direct quotations.

B. Definitions

The term far right extremist is used here to refer to a broad set of social and political movements that draw from far right political discourse to undermine the foundations of Australian liberal democracy. Far right extremism is characterised by adherence to several of the following positions: extreme nationalism, xenophobia, a suspicion towards democracy, racism, authoritarianism, and the advocacy of a strong state (Carter 2018; Mudde 1995). It is anti-democratic and revolutionary in orientation.

The term has been widely adopted to refer to a range of social political movements, revolutionary groups, and individuals operating in Australia and abroad. These groups rely on a polarised vision of the world that is intolerant of dissent (Berger 2018). The term 'far right extremist' incorporates non-state individuals and groups engaged in illegal and violent action, as well as groups or individuals attempting to undermine the social and political fabric of Australia through less violent strategies. Both of these reject liberal democracy as it is currently practised in Australia and pose a threat to social cohesion.

In Australia, far right extremism is predominantly characterised by individuals, groups, and ideologies committed to an extreme social, political, or ideological position that is pro-white identity (forming the 'in-group'), and actively suspicious of non-whites others (forming the 'out-group'). They reject the principles of democracy for all and demand a commitment to dehumanising and/or hostile action against out-groups, consisting of non-whites, Jews, Muslims, representatives of the liberal democratic state, and those who support a cosmopolitan, multicultural Australia.

Far right extremist groups, organisations and individuals actively appropriate the language of conservative right-wing political philosophy to spread their narratives. It is important to stress, however, that their language and narratives routinely go far beyond conservative discourse to incorporate intolerance, hatred, anti-government sentiment, illegal actions, and a rejection of liberal democratic norms and values (Dean, Bell, and Vakhitova 2016). Far right 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. They are revolutionary rather than conservative in their approach. They agitate to undermine and destroy all political elites in Australia, including conservative politics and politicians.

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Conflicts of Interest

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