Rise of online right-wing extremism mapped in landmark study

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Researchers from Macquarie and Victoria Universities have published the first study mapping the online activity of right-wing extremists in New South Wales. Their study has revealed a network of highly active,

social, and complex communities that is difficult to monitor for potential offline violence and is highly successful in radicalizing at-risk individuals and introducing hateful and extreme rhetoric into Australian political discussions. The report highlighted the strong influence of American populist politics particularly Trumpism on right-wing extremism in Australia.

Macquarie researchers Dr. Brian Ballsun-Stanton, Lise Waldek and Dr. Julian Droogan mined publicly available social media data to examine the narratives and recruitment methods of right-wing extremist groups and individuals and determine the level of risk posed by these online communities.

Across social media platforms Twitter, Facebook, Gab, Reddit, 4chan, and 8chan/kun, the researchers found complex and dynamic communities that unite around shared narratives of threats to "white identity." These highly social spaces become echo chambers where like-minded individuals reaffirm their extremist world views, socialize and develop their identities.

Common narratives used to recruit and engage users included anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic messaging, and far-right conspiracy theories such as QAnon.

"The propagation of extremist narratives online serves to polarise political debate, and to undermine trust in institutions and democracy," say the study authors. "Social media is playing a key role in the rise of right-wing violent extremism. The Christchurch terror attack is one example."

The authors say that messages advocating violence were frequent, particularly on less-moderated anonymous platforms, but the actual threat of violence was difficult to distinguish from ironic and

exaggerated posts.

"We know that individuals with violent intentions exist on these platforms. However, this environment is full of bragging, irony, and fantasy, meaning identification of violent threats is difficult. While online right-wing extremist activity is difficult to moderate, ensuring real-world programs and infrastructure are well-placed to identify at-risk individuals and communities is essential as this threat continues to grow in NSW and Australia."

The report emphasizes the need for increasing focus on societal resilience and strength building capabilities as well as targeted risk reduction strategies, and provides a baseline for further targeted research.

More information: Mapping Networks and Narratives of Online Right-Wing Extremists in New South Wales: zenodo.org/record/4071472#.X4BdT9BKjD4

Provided by Macquarie University