



**VIOLENT EXTREMISM
AND TERRORISM
ONLINE IN 2019:
THE YEAR IN REVIEW**

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INTRODUCTION

This report treats developments in the violent extremist and terrorist online scene(s) and responses to them in the **13-month period¹ from 1 December 2018 to 31 December 2019**. It is divided into two parts: Part I focuses on the online activities of the extreme right, with a particular emphasis on the Christchurch attacks, and Part II on violent online jihadism, particularly the so-called 'Islamic State' (hereafter IS). The Conclusion provides a summing-up and identifies issues in this realm that bear watching in 2020.

Those familiar with our previous reports² will know that the structuring of these was slightly different, with analysis of violent jihadi activity preceding discussion of extreme right online activity in all instances. The March 2019 Christchurch attacks and a series of subsequent attacks in the United States and Germany put extreme right online activity firmly centre stage however, which is reflected in the structuring of the present report.

PART I. THE ONLINE EXTREME RIGHT TOOK CENTRE STAGE IN 2019

Close attention by journalists and policymakers to the widespread use of the internet by violent Western (i.e. American, Australian, and European)³ right-wing extremists and terrorists is relatively recent.⁴ It was a reaction, at least in part, to an eruption of hateful content online in 2015 and 2016, which arose out of the US presidential campaign and subsequent election of President Trump, the Brexit referendum, a spate of Islamic State (IS)-inspired or directed terrorist attacks, and the arrival of large numbers of refugees to Europe from war torn Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The extreme right sought to capitalise on the fear and anger generated by the terrorist attacks and the refugee crisis and the elation generated by the other events to increase its political power and recruit new

¹ Previous reports covered a twelve-month period from 1 December to 30 November, but we are now seeking to regularise the date range. In order to do this, the present report covers December 2018, which was not addressed in our 2018 report, and all 12 months of 2019. Our next report will cover 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020.

² VOX-Pol's *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2018: The Year in Review* addressed developments in violent extremism and terrorism online from 1 December 2017 to 30 November 2018. It is free-to-access online at https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Year-in-Review-2018.pdf. Our 2017 *Year in Review* is available at https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/YiR-2017_Web-Version.pdf and its 2016 equivalent at http://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Year-In-Review-WEB.pdf.

³ It is worth noting here that there are large and growing RWE constituencies outside of the West, including in, for example, Brazil, India, and the Philippines, that also have substantial online presences and that insufficient attention has been paid to by researchers to-date.

⁴ The New York Times. 'The New Radicalization of the Internet.' *The New York Times*, 24 November, 2018.



followers, including via the internet. They were aided in their efforts by foreign influence campaigns spreading disinformation on many of the same talking points.

In 2017, more focused attention was drawn to the role of the internet in extreme right activity in the wake of events at the mid-August 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA. Concerns about the political fallout of online extreme right activity, including disinformation and radicalisation, continued to receive attention throughout 2018—at least partially due to a series of attacks and failed attacks in the US that appeared to have significant online components.⁵

The 15 March, 2019 Christchurch terrorist attack mainstreamed these concerns. The New Zealand mosque attack, in which 51 people died, was peculiarly internet-centric, including a pre-planned online manifesto distribution strategy and Facebook Live video stream, which has ensured that the threat posed by contemporary extreme right online activity is now under greater scrutiny than ever. The April 2019 Poway synagogue attack, the August 2019 El Paso Walmart shooting, the October 2019 Halle shootings, and a series of similar attacks only heightened attention to right-wing extremists' use of the internet further.

Right-wing extremists—like all extremists—structure their beliefs on the basis that the success and survival of the in-group is inseparable from the negative acts of an out-group and, in turn, they are willing to assume both an offensive and defensive stance in the name of the success and survival of the in-group.⁶ Western right-wing extremism may thus be conceptualised as a racially, ethnically, and/or sexually defined nationalism, which is typically framed in terms of white power and/or white identity (i.e. the in-group) that is grounded in xenophobic and exclusionary understandings of the perceived threats posed by some combination of non-whites, Jews, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, members of the LGBTQI+ community,⁷ and feminists (i.e. the out-group(s)).⁸

Right-wing extremists were some of the very first users to engage in online politics and were the earliest adopters of internet technology for violent extremist purposes.⁹ The volume and frequency of production of extreme right online content cannot however be measured in the same way as that of IS as the extreme right scene is not dominated by a single group or a discernible number of franchises or groups as is the case with violent jihadism. Instead, the extreme right is composed of a shifting and complex overlapping of individuals, groups, movements, political parties, and media organs—both online and traditional—espousing extreme nationalist, National Socialist/Nazi, fascist, white supremacist, and/or so-called 'alt-right' ideology.

Important to acknowledge too is the difficulty of differentiating users, social media accounts, websites, etc., espousing more traditionally violent extremist views (e.g., Nazi or neo-Nazi) from

⁵ These included the US mail bomb scare, the shooting dead of two African-Americans in a Kentucky supermarket, and the Pittsburgh synagogue attack, all of which took place within days of each other in October 2018.

⁶ J. M. Berger. 2018. *Extremism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁷ 'LGBTQI+' is a shorthand reference to describe the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer, inter-sex, and other sexual identity-based communities.

⁸ Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens. 2016. 'Uneasy Alliances: A Look at the Right-Wing Extremist Movement in Canada.' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39(9): 819-841.

⁹ For more, see Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan Macnair. 2019. *Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends*. The Hague: ICCT.



users who hold more radical populist views around, particularly, anti-immigration and Islam. In fact, distinguishing between democratic opposition and extremist groups and rhetoric is not just a problem for researchers seeking to measure the latter's online activity, but increasingly for authorities also.¹⁰

Given the foregoing, this section of the report is divided into two sub-sections. Sub-section one addresses the online components of the Christchurch attacks. The second section describes and discusses a variety of other online—and associated 'real world'—activity that took place in 2019, addressing activity on and by both major/mainstream and fringe platforms.

Online Aspects of the 2019 Christchurch Attacks and Responses

Larossi Abballa, who murdered a policeman and his partner, in Magnanville, France in June, 2016, used Facebook Live to broadcast and justify his actions whilst holding the couple's young child hostage. The final sentence of VOX-Pol's 2016 *Year in Review* report read "It is the first time a terrorist has used a live-streaming service in the midst of an attack; it is unlikely to be the last."¹¹ On 15 March 2019, two consecutive mass shootings were carried out by Australian Brenton Tarrant at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Fifty-one people were killed in the attacks and an additional 49 injured. The attacker announced his intentions on 8chan immediately prior to carrying them out and his journey to and attack on the first mosque was live-streamed on Facebook via his helmet-mounted GoPro camera.

8chan was established in 2013 and was basically a more extreme version of 4chan. Mathew Prince, CEO of 8chan's previously main security provider Cloudflare, termed 8chan not just "a cesspool of hate," but—in a nod to the concept of 'privacy by design'—"lawless by design."¹² This conceptualisation points to the way in which 8chan's user base was the outcome of a September 2014 decision by 4chan's founder Christopher 'Moot' Poole to ban GamerGate¹³ discussions from 4chan, which enraged many users.

8chan's founder, Fredrik Brennan, saw this as an opportunity to grow his user numbers and attracted the disenchanted 4channers and others to his site by defending GamerGaters and promising very light touch moderation, which meant, in effect, that 8chan was known as being a haven for RWE causes almost from its founding.¹⁴ By Autumn 2014, 8chan posts had increased from around 100 a day to around 5,000 an hour, according to Brennan.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ben Knight. 'Right-wing Populism Poses New Problem for German Intel.' *Deutsche Welle*, 22 November, 2016.

¹¹ Maura Conway. 2016. *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2016: The Year in Review*. Dublin: VOX-Pol, p.16.

¹² Matthew Prince, "Terminating Service for 8Chan." *Cloudflare Blog*, 5 August, 2019, <https://blog.cloudflare.com/terminatingservice-for-8chan>.

¹³ Matt Lees. 'What Gamergate should have taught us about the "alt-right."' *The Guardian*, 1 December, 2016.

See also Andrea Braithwaite. 2016. 'It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity.' *Social Media + Society* 2(4).

¹⁴ A few months later, Brennan sought advice from 8chan users for a proposed Daily Stormer article, a posting that was accompanied by images of KKK-robed beer cans attending a lynching. In the event, he contributed a piece to the Daily Stormer titled 'Hotwheels: Why I Support Eugenics.' 'Hotwheels' is Brennan's online moniker.

¹⁵ Timothy McLaughlin. 'The Weird, Dark History of 8chan.' *Wired*, 8 August, 2019.



In 2019, 8chan was directly implicated in three high profile extreme right terrorist attacks, the most notorious of which was Christchurch. Prior to the attack, Tarrant announced his intentions on 8chan, produced a 'manifesto' linked on the website, and livestreamed his attack on Facebook via a link also posted to 8chan's /pol/ board. Tarrant was roundly praised on 8chan following the Christchurch attack, in particular for his 'high score' (i.e. the high number of people murdered by him), with a number of memes (see Box 1) circulated on the site depicting him as a saint, complete with halo.¹⁶

Box 1. Memes: A Short Explanation

Memes are pieces of text, images, videos, or some combination of these, oftentimes humorous, which are copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations, the most successful of which enter into popular cultural consciousness. Image macros, still images upon which a caption has been digitally superimposed, are the most common form of meme and are widely circulated across social media platforms.

Hateful memes often feature distorted or unflattering images of people of colour, Jewish people, and others overlaid with 'humorous' text. As Siapera *et al.* point out:

In general, visual elements tend to be recalled faster than audio or text and retention for images is better and more accurate compared to verbal and textual information. This is important to note here because it implies that images of hate may be more pernicious than words alone.¹⁷

The Christchurch and subsequent attacks caused 8chan's banishment from the surface web. Even before this however it was still not as easily accessible as more mainstream platforms due to its technical workings, on the one hand, and its user culture, on the other. Like 4chan, 8chan had a very pared down appearance; also, like 4chan, 8chan's users were almost wholly anonymous except when employing a trip code,

which allowed for verification that otherwise anonymous posts were contributed by a single user.¹⁸ In terms of its user culture, 8chan was well known for the very large amounts of so-called 'shitposting' on the site, which has been described as "the act of throwing out huge amounts of content, most of it ironic, low-quality trolling, for the purpose of provoking an emotional reaction in less internet-savvy viewers. The ultimate goal is to derail productive discussion and distract readers."¹⁹

Shitposting is not unique to 8chan, being a part of overall 'chan culture,' but could be said to have been particularly prevalent and dense on it. Shitposting can be distinguished from 'effort posting,' which Urban Dictionary describes as "when a poster on an internet forum writes about their opinion,

¹⁶ Other RWE 'heroes' portrayed as saints in images posted online include the 2011 Norwegian RWE terrorist Anders Breivik, the May 2014 Isla Vista, California shooter, Elliot Rodger, and the June 2015 Charleston church attacker, Dylann Roof.

¹⁷ Eugenia Siapera, Elena Moreo, and Jiang Zhou. 2018. *Hate Track: Tracking And Monitoring Racist Speech Online*. Dublin City University: School of Communications and FuJo, p.34.

¹⁸ Matt Binder. 'Inside the Fight to Keep 8chan Offline.' *Mashable*, 5 August, 2019. According to Binder, 'Q,' the anonymous generator and transmitter of the bizarre QAnon conspiracy allegedly posted on 8chan using such a code: "Without 8chan, it will be difficult for followers to determine whether any message is from the original Q."

¹⁹ Robert Evans. 'Shitposting, Inspirational Terrorism, and the Christchurch Mosque Massacre.' *Bellingcat*, 15 March, 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/rest-of-world/2019/03/15/shitposting-inspirational-terrorism-and-the-christchurch-mosquemassacre>.



project, story or otherwise and actually takes the time to properly research, cite sources, and utilize proper diction and grammar, generally as a means to convince, sway, or otherwise argue.”²⁰

Familiarity with these terms renders the opening line of Brenton Tarrant’s directly pre-attack 8chan post that it was “time to stop shitposting and time to make a real life effort post” comprehensible. In general, meaningfully distinguishing between online shitposts and effort posts on the chans can be difficult as many posts and threads are an opaque jumble of the two. This allows users to continue to insist that their online activity is largely in jest and ironic, while at the same time giving those users familiar with the boards’ sub-cultural languages the opportunity to immerse themselves in RWE communities of support and emulation.

As regards mainstream platforms implicated in the Christchurch attacks, Facebook Live’s usage by Tarrant to film his journey to and attack on worshipers at the Al Noor mosque put Facebook at the centre of what has been described as the first “internet-native” terrorist attack.²¹ “The point of the attack,” as The Guardian’s Jason Burke pointed out, was “not just to kill Muslims, but to make a video of someone killing Muslims.”²² Tarrant’s video was, therefore, “not so much a medium for his message insofar as it *was* the message, even more so than his actual manifesto” [italics in original].²³

Facebook’s response was *ad hoc*.²⁴ None of the fewer than 200 people who watched the atrocity unfold live flagged the stream to Facebook, as “[t]he first user report on the original video came in 29 minutes after the video started, and 12 minutes after the live broadcast ended.”²⁵ Before the video was removed from Facebook, more than 1.2 million videos of the attack were removed by Facebook at upload, so they were prevented from gaining any views on the platform; “[a]pproximately 300,000 additional copies were removed after they were posted.”²⁶

Google’s video-sharing platform, YouTube, was also in the eye of this storm. Neal Mohan, YouTube’s Chief Product Officer, told The Washington Post that a group of senior executives— known internally as “incident commanders”—tasked with responding to crises worked through the night in an effort to identify and remove what The Post described as “tens of thousands of videos.”²⁷ YouTube has not supplied figures on exactly how many videos it actually removed, but they were being posted as frequently “as one per second in the hours after the shooting,” according to Mohan.

Many of these were re-packaged or re-cut versions of the original video that “were altered in ways that outsmarted the company’s detection systems.” This included altering the size of the clips, adding

²⁰ See <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=effort%20post>.

²¹ Kevin Roose. ‘A Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet.’ *The New York Times*, 15 March, 2019.

²² Jason Burke. ‘Technology is Terrorism’s Most Effective Ally. It Delivers a Global Audience.’ *The Guardian*, 17 March, 2019.

²³ Graham Macklin. 2019. ‘The Christchurch Attacks: Livestream Terror in the Viral Video Age.’ *CTC Sentinel* 12(6): p. 19.

²⁴ Kate Klonick. ‘Inside the Team at Facebook that Dealt with the Christchurch Shooting.’ *The New Yorker*, 25 April, 2019.

²⁵ Guy Roen. ‘A Further Update on New Zealand Terrorist Attack.’ *Facebook Newsroom*, 20 March, 2019,

<https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2019/03/technical-update-on-new-zealand>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Elizabeth Dwoskin and Craig Timberg. ‘Inside YouTube’s Struggle to Shut Down Videos of the New Zealand Shooting – and the Humans who Outsmarted its System.’ *The Washington Post*, 18 March, 2019.



watermarks or logos, and videoing the footage while playing it on another device and then posting this.

The continuing availability of the attack footage on their platform caused YouTube to take at least two first-time steps: (1) they temporarily ceased human content moderation to speed-up removal of videos flagged by their automated systems, and (2) they temporarily disabled several search functions, including the ability to search for 'recent uploads.' While this worked, it also had downsides such as many unproblematic videos being swept-up in the automated non-moderated deletions.²⁸

In terms of longer-term responses, the most direct outcome from Tarrant's attacks was the so-called 'Christchurch Call.'²⁹ The 'Christchurch Call to Action Summit' was a political summit initiated by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern that took place two months after the Christchurch shootings on 15 May, 2019 in Paris, France. The Summit was co-chaired by Prime Minister Ardern and French President Emmanuel Macron. It aimed to "bring together countries and tech companies in an attempt to bring to an end the ability to use social media to organise and promote terrorism and violent extremism."

Seventeen countries originally signed the non-binding agreement, with another 31 countries following suit on 24 September, 2019. Signatories include all EU member states, excepting Croatia, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. The pledge is composed of three sections, one directed at governments, one at online service providers, and one focusing on the ways in which they can work together. A range of Internet companies also committed to the Call, as part of their involvement in the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). These included Amazon, Dailymotion, Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Qwant, Twitter, and YouTube.

It is worth noting that the US was not represented at the summit and is not a signatory to the Call due to concerns over its compliance with US constitutional protections. The White House did, however, state its support for the Summit's "overarching message" and "endorsed its overall goals."³⁰

Additional Notable Extreme Right Online Activity in 2019 and Responses

Major Platforms

In addition to the attacks in Christchurch, 8chan was implicated in two further high profile extreme right-wing terrorist attacks in 2019.

On 27 April, 19- year-old John Earnest opened fire, killing one woman, at a synagogue in Poway, California. On 3 August, 21-year-old Patrick Crusius opened fire and killed 22 people in a Walmart in El Paso, Texas. Like Tarrant, both Earnest and Crusius also posted 'manifestos' to 8chan prior to their attacks. And, like Tarrant, both drew on the concept of 'the great replacement'—Crusius explicitly

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ The official Christchurch Call website is at <https://www.christchurchcall.com/>.

³⁰ The White House's 15 May, 2019 'Statement on Christchurch Call for Action' is available at <https://nz.usembassy.gov/statement-on-christchurch-call-for-action/>.



and Earnest implicitly—in those documents. The Christchurch shooter was mentioned 10 times in Earnest’s ‘manifesto,’ in which he attributed his attack directly to Tarrant.

The Poway shooter was, on the other hand, subject to widespread ridicule on 8chan due to his ‘low score,’ which was attributed to his ill-preparedness, including stemming from his having spent insufficient time on 8chan. Crusius’ ‘manifesto’ opens with a reference to “the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto.”

The response to the El Paso attack on 8chan was more muted than the responses to the other two attacks however, with a lot of the discussion centring around the threat to 8chan from yet another attacker being associated with the site and many therefore portraying it as a ‘false flag’ event perpetrated precisely to bring this about. In the event, 8chan was no longer accessible on the open web by the end of 2019, as Cloudflare and a number of other providers had pulled their services.

In addition to the attacks in New Zealand and the US, two high profile right-wing extremist attacks also took place in Germany in 2019. The first of these was the 2 June assassination in his home of Walter Lübcke, a local Christian Democratic Union (CDU) politician in Hesse in eastern Germany, by 45-year-old Neo-Nazi Stephan Ernst. Ernst was reported by *Der Spiegel* “to have had contact with neo-Nazis from the militant group ‘Combat 18,’ among other things.”³¹ Only a handful of right-wing groups are officially designated as terrorist in any jurisdiction; neo-Nazi group Blood & Honour and its armed branch, Combat 18, nevertheless now fall into this category as in May 2019 Canada officially listed both groups as terrorist organisations.³²

Prior to this, on 24 March, 2019, Facebook had come under fire in the UK press for refusing to remove Combat18-linked pages because they were deemed not to contravene Facebook’s Community Standards. According to *The Independent* newspaper:

Facebook refused to take down a page used by Combat 18’s Greek wing, despite its cover photo showing a man performing a Nazi salute, in front of a wall sprayed with a swastika. Another page for Combat 18’s Australian faction complained that after the New Zealand terror attack, the ‘media and leftists would carry on for months,’ while spreading the same ideology that inspired the shooter.³³

Having said this, just three days later, on 27 March, 2019, shortly after the Christchurch attacks, Facebook announced in a Blog post titled ‘Standing Against Hate’ that it was instituting a:

...ban on praise, support and representation of white nationalism and white separatism on Facebook and Instagram...Our policies have long prohibited hateful treatment of people based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity or religion — and that has always included white supremacy. We didn’t originally apply the same rationale to expressions of white nationalism and white separatism because we were thinking about broader concepts of nationalism and separatism — things like American pride and Basque separatism, which are an important part of people’s identity. But over the past three months our conversations with members of civil

³¹ *Der Spiegel*. ‘Verdächtiger hatte offenbar Kontakt zu militanten Neonazis von “Combat 18”.’ *Der Spiegel*, 17 June, 2019.

³² See Public Safety Canada, ‘Currently Listed Entities’, <https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrtr/cntr-trrrsm/lstd-ntts/crrnt-lstd-ntts-en.aspx#60>.

³³ Lizzie Dearden. ‘Neo-Nazi Groups Allowed to Stay on Facebook Because They “Do Not Violate Community Standards.”’ *The Independent*, 24 March, 2019.



society and academics who are experts in race relations around the world have confirmed that white nationalism and white separatism cannot be meaningfully separated from white supremacy and organized hate groups. Our own review of hate figures and organizations – as defined by our Dangerous Individuals & Organizations policy – further revealed the overlap between white nationalism and white separatism and white supremacy. Going forward, while people will still be able to demonstrate pride in their ethnic heritage, we will not tolerate praise or support for white nationalism and white separatism.³⁴

Announced in the same Blog post was a Facebook initiative to start connecting users who input white supremacy-related search terms to the organisation Life After Hate, which is focused on assisting people to exit hate groups.³⁵

Later in the year, on 9 October, 27-year-old Stephan Balliet attempted to forcibly enter a Jewish community centre and synagogue in Halle, in eastern Germany, with the purpose of undertaking a mass shooting. Unable to gain entry to the building, Ernst shot dead a passing woman and then shot and killed a man at a Turkish restaurant. Balliet appears to have been a so-called ‘copycat’ attacker too, inspired by the previously mentioned attacks involving the posting of a manifesto and online livestreaming.

Notable, in addition to his use of a homemade firearm, was Balliet’s use of the Twitch and Meguca online platforms during the course of his attack:

On October 9, 2019, at 11:54 AM, the alleged shooter Stephan Balliet allegedly sat in his rental car on a parking lot close to the Jewish community center and synagogue in the eastern German town of Halle and started his livestream on the gaming platform Twitch. He allegedly used a smartphone attached to a helmet for that purpose. At 11:57 AM, he published a link to the Twitch livestream on the social media picture network site Meguca, where he allegedly uploaded his manifesto. Meguca, the now-defunct niche network site, contained general-purpose discussions and was “loosely affiliated with 4chan’s anime board.” According to Twitch, only five users actually saw the livestream in real time. It took the platform administrators 30 minutes to find and delete the video. By then, it had been watched by approximately 2,200 viewers.³⁶

The first activation of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism’s (GIFCT) ‘Content Incident Protocol’ (CIP) was in response to the Halle attack. The CIP is focused on responding “to emerging and active terrorist or violent extremist events” and assessing “any potential online content produced and disseminated by those responsible for or aiding in the attack.” The GIFCT had this to say about the Halle attack:

...the perpetrator filmed his attack and copies of the original livestream circulated on non-GIFCT member platforms. Ultimately, GIFCT shared hashes, or digital fingerprints, related to 36 visually-distinct videos from

³⁴ Facebook. ‘Standing Against Hate.’ *Facebook Newsroom*, 27 March, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/standing-against-hate/>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Daniel Köhler. 2019. ‘The Halle, Germany, Synagogue Attack and the Evolution of the Far-Right Terror Threat.’ *CTC Sentinel* 12(11), p.14.



the attack so that member companies could quickly detect and remove any instances of the content on their respective platforms.³⁷

In the wake of the Christchurch attacks, GIFCT members workshopped the protocol with Europol and the New Zealand Government. GIFCT has initiated the assessment process more than 35 times in response to terrorist and violent extremist events globally since Halle.³⁸

Christchurch was not, of course, YouTube's first encounter with right-wing extremist material on its platform. In particular, YouTube—which has been described by some as “a radicalization machine for the far right”³⁹—has been criticised for the propensity of its recommender system to suggest extreme right content to users. In an article that first appeared online in 2014, O’Callaghan *et al.* showed that users accessing English- and German-language extreme right YouTube videos were very likely to be recommended further right-wing extremist content within the same category or related extreme right content from a different category, but unlikely to be presented with non-extreme right content.⁴⁰

Research conducted by Reed *et al.* in 2019 had very similar findings.⁴¹ Such research undermines the almost exclusive focus to-date on individual users as the main protagonists in right-wing extremist cyberspaces and draws attention instead to the way in which “the immersion of some users in YouTube’s ER [extreme right] spaces is a coproduction between the content generated by users and the affordances of YouTube’s recommender system.”⁴²

In 2019, YouTube also came under fire with respect to attention-based monetisation. In August, the *Washington Post* reported on the experiences of YouTube content moderators and their claims that abusive posts by popular creators were subject to less stringent moderation than posts by those with less lucrative channels. In June 2019, and only after a public outcry, YouTube demonetised Steven Crowder, an extreme-right commentator with over four million subscribers, for repeated verbal abuse of Carlos Maza, a homosexual Hispanic journalist. The incident, which coincided with an already-planned change in YouTube’s hate speech policy,⁴³ displayed significant inconsistencies in how the platform enforces its rules. At one point, it appeared to interpret its own public policy on hate speech and harassment in four different ways within 24 hours.

³⁷ Monika Bickert and Erin Saltman. ‘An Update on Our Efforts to Combat Terrorism Online.’ *Facebook Newsroom*, 20 December 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/12/counterterrorism-efforts-update/>

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Kelly Weill. ‘How YouTube Built a Radicalization Machine for the Far-Right.’ *Daily Beast*, 17 December, 2018. See also Rebecca Lewis. 2018. *Alternative Influence: Broadcasting the Reactionary Right on YouTube*. New York: Data & Society.

⁴⁰ Derek O’Callaghan, Derek Greene, Maura Conway, Joe Carthy, and Pádraig Cunningham. 2015. ‘Down the (White) Rabbit Hole: The Extreme Right and Online Recommender Systems.’ *Social Science Computer Review* 33(4): 459-478.

⁴¹ Alastair Reed, Joe Whittaker, Fabio Votta, and Seán Looney. 2019. ‘Radical Filter Bubbles: Social Media Personalisation Algorithms and Extremist Content.’ Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology, RUSI: London, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/20190726_grntt_paper_08_0.pdf.

⁴² O’Callaghan *et al.* ‘Down the (White) Rabbit Hole,’ p. 461.

⁴³ YouTube. ‘Our Ongoing Work to Tackle Hate.’ *YouTube Blog*, 5 June, 2019, <https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/06/ourongoing-work-to-tackle-hate.html>.



According to the Washington Post, moderators had already escalated their concerns about Crowder’s activity on the platform to YouTube at least one month prior. “The consensus on the floor was that the content was demeaning and it wasn’t safe,” said one of the moderators interviewed. “YouTube’s stance is that nothing is really an issue until there is a headline about it.” A current moderator was more explicit: “The picture we get from YouTube is that the company has to make money—so what we think should be crossing a line, to them isn’t crossing one.”⁴⁴ Notable is that YouTube has since expanded its anti-harassment policy – it is, however, too soon to tell what the impact of this latest update will be.⁴⁵

It is worth mentioning here too that, like Facebook, YouTube was criticised in 2019 regarding the workings of its livestreaming service, including being forced to shut down the comment section on its livestream of a 9 April US congressional hearing on white nationalism after it was overwhelmed with hateful comments, including expressions of anti-Semitism and white supremacy.⁴⁶

Fringe Platforms

Beyond the major social media platforms, a diversity of more fringe platforms host increasing amounts of right-wing extremist content, due at least in part to its increased takedown by major platforms. The fringe platforms trafficked by right-wing extremists are of broadly two sorts: first, dedicated right-wing extremist platforms and, second, general platforms with dedicated right-wing extremist boards or boards that have been colonised by right-wing extremists.

Even prior to Charlottesville and Christchurch, the increasing inhospitableness of major social media and other online platforms to extreme right content and activity resulted in far-right—largely US—activists establishing their own platforms that welcome, indeed encourage, just such content and activity. Pronounced in an August 2017 tweet by the company as seeking “to make speech free again and say F*CK YOU Silicon Valley elitist trash,” Gab is currently the most prominent platform fitting that category.

Gab’s founder, Andrew Torba, established it in 2016 in direct response to the ejecting by major social media platforms of high-profile right-wing extremist figures including, for example, Laura Loomer, Tommy Robinson, Richard Spencer, and Milo Yiannopoulos. By the tail-end of 2018, it had approximately 450,000 users that had posted approximately 30 million comments.⁴⁷ Noteworthy is that in July 2019 Gab changed its hosting infrastructure to Mastodon, which is a free open-source self-hosting social network service. Mastodon promptly released a statement announcing themselves “completely opposed to Gab’s project and philosophy, which seeks to monetize and platform racist content while hiding behind the banner of free speech,” and describing some of the ways the

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Dwoskin. ‘YouTube’s Arbitrary Standards: Stars Keep Making Money Even After Breaking the Rules.’ *Washington Post*, 9 August, 2019.

⁴⁵ For more, see Casey Newton. ‘YouTube Expands Anti-Harassment Policy to Include All Creators and Public Figures.’ *The Verge*, 11 December, 2019.

⁴⁶ Queenie Wong. ‘Hateful Comments Flood YouTube Livestream of Congressional Hearing on Hate.’ *C/Net*, 9 April, 2019.

⁴⁷ Matthew Phillips, Arunkumar Bagavathi, Shannon E. Reid, Matthew Valasik, and Siddharth Krishnan. ‘The Daily Use of Gab is Climbing. Which Talker Might Become as Violent as the Pittsburgh Synagogue Gunman?’ *The Washington Post*, 29 November, 2018.



Mastodon community are blocking access avenues to Gab.⁴⁸ Despite this, Gab is now Mastadon's biggest node, with the latter having no effective way of shutting Gab down.⁴⁹

Unlike Gab, Reddit (estbd. 2005) was not set-up for the purpose of forwarding right-wing extremism. Similar to Twitter, it currently has around 330 million pseudonymous monthly active users.⁵⁰ As a result, Reddit is routinely in the top ten 10 most visited sites in the US,⁵¹ UK, and other—particularly English-speaking—Western countries (e.g. Australia, Canada, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand), as well as being in the top 20 most-visited sites globally.⁵²

Several far- and alt-right related subreddits—subsidiary threads or forums focusing on a specific topic within the overall Reddit forum—have been established or greatly expanded in size in recent years, with many of them dedicated either explicitly or tacitly to a wide variety of hatreds and conspiracies.⁵³ Once new users are introduced to and become immersed in these subreddits, they are often 'rewarded' in the form of 'upvotes', 'likes', and general positive reception for their contributions to the sub-forum, especially when sustaining and progressing a subreddit's agreed upon norms,⁵⁴ oftentimes in ways similar to offline reinforcement (e.g. laughter, voicing agreement, etc.).⁵⁵

Probably the most well-known right-wing extremist subreddit is r/The_Donald, a popular pro-Trump space. In the immediate aftermath of the Christchurch attacks, many r/The_Donald posts justified the shootings and/or displayed anti-Muslim hate.⁵⁶ It has been quarantined since June 2019 for "threats of violence against police and public officials."⁵⁷ Quarantining means that links to r/The_Donald no longer appear on Reddit's 'front page,' it is not returned in Reddit search results, and users must be logged-in in order to contribute to it.⁵⁸ While Reddit has a relatively laissez faire attitude to content moderation, the quarantining of r/The_Donald was not the first such action taken by Reddit administrators.

Like Reddit, 4chan's (estbd. 2003) original purposes were non-RWE in their orientation; instead, the site largely focused on Japanese anime and manga.⁵⁹ In 2019, it hosted 70 topic specific image boards,

⁴⁸ Mastodon. 2019. 'Statement on Gab's Fork of Mastodon,' <https://blog.joinmastodon.org/2019/07/statement-on-gabs-fork-ofmastodon>.

⁴⁹ Ben Makuch. 'The Nazi-Free Alternative to Twitter is Now Home to the Biggest Far Right Social Network.' *Vice News*, 11 July, 2019.

⁵⁰ This is according to Statista's 'Most Popular Social Networks Worldwide as of July 2019.'

⁵¹ See <https://www.alexacom/topsites/countries/US>.

⁵² See <https://www.alexacom/topsites/countries/GB> for the site's UK ranking and <https://www.alexacom/topsites> for its global ranking.

⁵³ See Adrienne L. Massanari. 2018. 'Rethinking Research Ethics, Power, and the Risk of Visibility in the Era of the "Alt-Right" Gaze.' *Social Media + Society* 4(2): 1-9.

⁵⁴ Ryan M Milner. 2013. 'Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz.' *Fibreculture Journal* 22: 62-92.

⁵⁵ Pete Simi, Kathleen Blee, Matthew DeMichele, and Steven Windisch. 2017. 'Addicted to Hate: Identity Residual Among Former White Supremacists.' *American Sociological Review* 82(6): 1167-1187.

⁵⁶ Jacob Shamsian. 'Reddit is Allowing a Major Trump-Supporting Community to Flourish Despite Members Defending the New Zealand Mosque Shooter.' *Business Insider*, 22 March, 2019.

⁵⁷ BBC News. 'Reddit Places Pro-Donald-Trump Forum in Quarantine.' *BBC News*, 27 June, 2019.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ For an alternative view, see Fujioka, Brett. 'Japan's Cynical Romantics, Precursors to the Alt-Right.' *Tablet*, 8 August, 2019.



including those devoted to ‘Photography,’ ‘Food & Cooking,’ ‘Science & Math,’ and a variety of ‘Adult’ themes. It claims to have “over 22 million monthly visitors,”⁶⁰— the majority of whom are assumed to be young men—known as ‘anons’ (dubbed as such due to the site being wholly anonymous).⁶¹ On 4chan, no logins are required, usernames are optional, and threads expire after a certain time.⁶²

4chan became more widely known in 2014 as a central node—along with Reddit—in the online harassment campaign against women in computer gaming known as ‘Gamergate,’ which had both RWE and misogynist elements.⁶³ The right-wing extremist QAnon conspiracy was also initiated by 4chan posts. Its /pol/ (‘politically incorrect’) board, in particular, continues to serve the extreme right, largely outside of mainstream scrutiny. That is where the strategies and goals of a younger and ‘hipper’ version of RWE are developed and eventually packaged for more mainstream consumption and appeal, often in the form of memes (see Box 1).⁶⁴

PART II. ONLINE JIHADISM IN 2019

Part II of this report is divided into two sections. Section one is concerned with the self-styled ‘Islamic State’s’ online status in 2019, while the second section briefly describes and discusses other jihadi online activity.

Islamic State Took Numerous Hits, Offline and Online, in 2019

Despite the loss of its ‘caliphate’ and a downturn in terrorist attacks in the West, IS was still active globally in both ‘real world’ and online settings in 2019. Its most deadly 2019 terrorist attack was the series of linked suicide bombings in Sri Lanka on 21 April, which killed over 250 people and injured at least double that amount (see Box 2). West Africa was the region that witnessed the greatest increase in IS-related activity in 2019 however. According to BBC Monitoring, for example, IS claimed a total of 34 attacks in Nigeria in January and February 2019, as compared to a total of 45 attacks there in the whole of 2018.⁶⁵ This was follow-up by the announcement of a new *wilayah*,⁶⁶ called Central Africa Province, after it claimed its first attack in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) on 18 April.

IS’s 2019 activity in west and central Africa, particularly Nigeria, should be seen through the lens of its losses in Syria and the group’s efforts to distract attention away from these. IS took a number of

⁶⁰ See <http://www.4chan.org/advertise>.

⁶¹ Anonymity is the default position on 4chan, but users can generate a unique “tripcode” that makes their posts pseudonymous rather than anonymous. For more, see 4chan’s FAQ at <http://www.4chan.org/faq#trip>.

⁶² James Palmer. ‘How Does Online Racism Spawn Mass Shooters?’ *Foreign Policy*, 4 August, 2019.

⁶³ Braithwaite, ‘It’s About Ethics in Games Journalism?’

⁶⁴ Dillon Ludemann. 2018. ‘/pol/emics: Ambiguity, Scales, and Digital Discourse on 4chan.’ *Discourse, Context & Media* 24.

⁶⁵ Faisal Irshaid. ‘Islamic State Activity in Nigeria Sees Notable Rise.’ *BBC Monitoring*, 22 March, 2019.

⁶⁶ IS’s *wilayat* or ‘provinces’ are basically officially designated branches of the organisation.



significant hits, both in the ‘real world’ and online, later in 2019 however. The most significant of these took place in quick succession in October and November 2019, with the group’s ‘Caliph,’ Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, blowing himself up during a 27 October 2019 raid targeting him by US forces in Syria's north-western Idlib Province and, shortly thereafter, Telegram, with the aid of Europol, making its first truly concerted effort to delete IS content from their platform.

This section of the report is divided into two sub-sections, the first focuses on IS’s online content production in 2019, including al Baghdadi’s last video appearance, and the second provides detailed description and analysis of Telegram’s end-of-year anti-IS activity.

IS’s Online Content Production in 2019: Quantity and Types

The nature and quantity of IS content being circulated online in 2019 did not change significantly since 2018. Images, including individual still images and multiple photos combined into ‘albums’ or ‘photo montages,’ infographics, screensavers/posters, and claims regarding operations, remained the most prevalent types of official online content being produced by IS in 2019. The existence of the ‘caliphate’ was core to IS’s propaganda; the military defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria denies the group perhaps its greatest propaganda asset, however.

The dominant themes within official IS media therefore shifted, with a war theme still prominent, but steadfastness in the face of losses emerging as a dominant theme too. An example of this was the 1 March release of a video entitled ‘The Significance of the Steadfastness in Al-Baghouz.’ IS’ loss of territory also continued to significantly impact its online content production and distribution capabilities, with content produced by official IS media outlets remaining in a state of decline.

Even prior to Baghdadi’s death, the most consequential 2019 IS media happening from a supply-side perspective was the release on 29 April of a video featuring the first appearance of the IS leader in a propaganda video for five years. It was, in fact, only Baghdadi’s second ever such appearance in a video and proved, ultimately, to be his last. Looking paler and, somewhat surprisingly, more corpulent than when he proclaimed the existence of IS’s now-collapsed ‘caliphate’ in summer 2014, Baghdadi acknowledged the group’s defeat in the Syrian town of Baghouz and blamed its demise on the “savagery” of Christians.

The 18-minute long al-Furqan production⁶⁷ shows him sitting cross-legged and with an AK47 assault rifle propped at his right. The video seemed designed to fulfil at least two purposes: 1.) to put-to-bed rumours that Baghdadi was dead and 2.) acknowledge the loss of the remaining pockets of IS territory, but to frame the overall “battle” as long and continuing.

Several audio recordings of Baghdadi were released by IS in recent years, the most recent in August 2018, but his non-appearance in public and/or on video fuelled speculation that he was impaired due to injuries or had even been killed. “Truthfully, the battle of Islam and its people against the cross and its people is a long battle,” he says in the video. “The battle of Baghouz is over. But it did show the

⁶⁷ Al-Furqan, which largely produces audio, was nonetheless also responsible for a number of previous high-profile IS videos, including February 2015’s infamous video of the burning of Jordanian fighter pilot Muad al-Kasasbeh and the July 2016 video detailing IS’s administrative structures and hierarchy. Al-Furqan also produced the *Salil al-Sawarim* (i.e. Clanging of the Swords) video series released by IS’s predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq.



savagery, brutality and ill intentions of the Christians towards the Muslim community.” At the end of the video, audio of Baghdadi’s voice praises the Sri Lanka bombers (see Box 2): “This is part of the vengeance that awaits the Crusaders and their henchmen,” he says, linking the attacks to the defeat in Baghouz. Text superimposed on a section of the video made further reference to the Easter attacks: “Americans and Europeans failed as we congratulate our brothers in Sri Lanka for their allegiance to the caliphate. And we advise them to stick to the cause of God and unity and to be a thorn in the chest of the crusaders.”

The video is thought to have been filmed around a week before its release and was followed-up on 16 September 2019 with the release of an, again Al Furqan-produced, audio message from Baghdadi calling for his followers to free detained ISIS members and their families held in camps in Iraq and Syria.

Box 2. The Role(s) of the Internet in the Sri Lanka Bombings

On Easter Sunday 2019, eight bombs went off in hotels and churches across Sri Lanka’s capital, Colombo; other western coastal cities; and towns in the east of the country. The attacks are thought to have been masterminded by one of the bombers, Zahran Hashim (34), a radical preacher. Two of the six bombers were brothers, Ilham Ibrahim (31) and his older brother Isham, scions of a very wealthy Sri Lankan family.

What role did the Internet play in the attack? Sri Lankan law enforcement believe a number of the attackers first encountered each other on social media. In particular, they believe that the Ibrahim brothers, who are thought to have bankrolled the attacks, came in contact with Hashim via Facebook and private chat rooms. In addition, according to journalists, another of the bombers “Jameel and the Ibrahim brothers knew each other well...Initially, it was Ilham who linked up with Jameel online.”⁶⁸ Beginning from around 2016, many in the group stayed in touch through WhatsApp and Telegram, but are said to have switched their communications to the encrypted messaging app Threema in the final weeks before the attacks.⁶⁹

The New York Times reported that the attackers’ preparations probably began as early as 2018, when the ringleader Hashim’s elder brother, Rilwan, lost several fingers and injured his eye in an explosive’s accident. He nevertheless continued to experiment with explosives, reportedly using instructions sourced from “Islamic State-related sites on the internet.” Rilwan died in an explosion during a police raid on 26 April, 2019, in eastern Sri Lanka. According to the Sri Lankan authorities, “bomb-making manuals” were also found on the computer of Achchi Mohamed Mohamadu Hassthun, one of the attackers who was thought to be the Easter Sunday bomb-maker; he may also have received bomb-making training in Turkey.⁷⁰

Online disinformation is also alleged to have had a role in the attack’s main instigator Hashim’s radicalisation. Amarasingam points to the well-documented role of social media in spreading misinformation and bizarre conspiracy theories in Sri Lanka, which has often spurred communal violence, with the use of Facebook and WhatsApp for these purposes playing a particularly destructive role in violent

⁶⁸ Meera Srinivasan. ‘The Inside Story of the 9 Suicide Bombers Behind Sri Lanka’s Savage Easter Attacks.’ *The Hindu*, 25 May, 2019.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Jeffrey Gettleman, Dharisha Bastians, and Hannah Beech. “‘We Knew What Was Coming’: Sri Lanka Sees ISIS’ Hand in Attacks.’ *New York Times*, 3 May, 2019.

episodes in the country. In 2013, a spate of violence against Muslim-owned businesses was spurred by rumours that Muslims were selling Sinhalese women underwear laced with sterilisation cream.

According to Amarasingam, “a similar rumour in late February 2018 would lead to another major episode of anti-Muslim violence in Sri Lanka, one that, some locals say, had a particularly strong impact on Zahran Hashim, the mastermind of the Easter attacks.”⁷¹ At the time, the government, like it would after the Easter bombings, temporarily blocked social media platforms in the country in order to prevent further spreading of disinformation and violence.⁷²

The precise role (i.e. whether it was inspired or directed) of IS in the Sri Lanka attacks remains contested. However, photos of the attackers and a video showing their pledge of allegiance to the group were released through official IS Telegram channels, which suggests that they had some connections with IS’s online media networks. In addition, prior to their deaths in a police raid, Zahran’s father and his two brothers, Rilwan and Zainee, recorded a video on a mobile telephone that later also circulated on IS Telegram channels. In it, Rilwan, states that they are “surrounded by dogs,” a seeming reference to the fact that their hideout had been discovered by the authorities, and goes on to say that they will teach Sri Lankans a lesson for “oppressing the Muslims.”⁷³

Other types of IS video products also continued to appear in 2019, but with some products also being discontinued. In August 2018, for example, IS’s al-Hayat Media Centre introduced a new video series: a weekly data journalism-type video release entitled ‘Harvest of the Soldiers.’ The series used animated infographics to supply statistics on IS attacks in a given week, broken down by date, location, type of attack, and targets.

The videos, in English and Arabic, averaged three to four minutes in length. Eighteen of these videos were produced by the end of November 2018, with a further six released in the two-month period between the commencement of the period under review in this report (i.e. 1 December 2018). The final ‘Harvest of the Soldiers’ (No. 24) release appeared at the end of January 2019. Also worth noting is that the ‘Inside the Caliphate’ video series had no new additions in the period under review either.⁷⁴

A previously key feature of IS’s online media strategy was its official magazines, which have ceased production. 2019 did however see the publication of two issues of English-language *al Risalah* (The Message) magazine by a media outlet known as Al Burhan Media Center Kashmir and associated with the pro-IS Jundul Khilafah Kashmir (JKK).⁷⁵ Iss. 1 was subtitled ‘Listen and Obey’ and ran to approximately 23 pages, while Iss. 2 was subtitled ‘The Lone Wolves’ and extended to 29 pages.

⁷¹ Amarnath Amarasingham. 2019. ‘Terrorism on the Teardrop Island: Understanding the Easter 2019 Attacks in Sri Lanka.’ *CTC Sentinel* 12(5), p.4.

⁷² Megha Rajagopalan and Aisha Nazim. “‘We Had to Stop Facebook’: When Anti-Muslim Violence Goes Viral.’ *Buzzfeed*, 7 April, 2018; Jane Wakefield. ‘Sri Lanka Attacks: The Ban on Social Media.’ *BBC News*, 23 April, 2019.

⁷³ Amarasingham, ‘Terrorism on the Teardrop Island,’ p.8.

⁷⁴ For more on this series, see Conway, *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2018*, pp.’s 7 – 8.

⁷⁵ The new magazine should not be confused with the earlier magazine of the same name published by Syria’s pro-al Qaeda al-Nusra Front. Four issues of al-Nusra’s *al Risalah* publication appeared between July 2015 and January 2017.



The publication, which appeared in January and February and then abruptly ceased publication, appeared to be targeted at Muslims living in Islamic State Jammu and Kashmir (ISJK).⁷⁶ In terms of official IS publications, its weekly Arabic-language newspaper *al-Naba'* (The News) continued to be published throughout 2019 and took on added salience, as a result.

Attention was drawn in last year's *Year in Review* report to the IS video titled 'Inside the Caliphate #8,' which contained clear acknowledgement of the increased amounts of user-generated content (UGC)—as distinct from official IS content—produced by IS 'fanboys' and 'fangirls' and apparent in online settings in 2018.⁷⁷ The video, which is largely concerned with dos and don'ts for IS's active online *munasirun* or 'supporters,' had the function of both crediting *munasirun* activity while, at the same time, seeking to rein it in somewhat.

Such unofficial activity nonetheless continued to play an outsized role in 2019. In October, for example, it was reported that the short-form video platform TikTok (estbd. 2016) had removed over 20 accounts that posted Islamic State propaganda. According to The Wall Street Journal, videos featuring IS fighters with guns, corpses, and IS *anashid* were posted on the platform. Other videos were reported to feature young women referring to themselves as "jihadist and proud." The videos were also reported to have used in-app features, like filters and hearts, an indicator that—despite the newspaper article's title: 'Islamic State Turns to Teen-Friendly TikTok, Adorning Posts with Pink Hearts'⁷⁸—this was not official IS content and activity, but initiated by 'fans.'

While TikTok has not taken off as a preferred IS platform, IS content distributors increased their experimentation with the so-called 'decentralised web' in 2019. Such experimentation is not new; Europol had this to say in their *TE-SAT 2019*, which surveyed the EU's terrorism landscape in 2018:

...pro-IS and pro-al-Qaeda Telegram channels advertised the use of alternative platforms relying on blockchain or peer-to-peer technology, e.g. Rocket.Chat and ZeroNet. However, jihadist activities on these platforms failed to gain traction in 2018. As a result, Telegram remained the platform of choice for both al-Qaeda and IS sympathisers. This attempted shift indicates jihadist groups' awareness of and willingness to exploit new technologies."⁷⁹

Decentralised platforms like RocketChat and ZeroNet proved attractive for IS content producers and distributors, as those platforms—unlike the major social media platforms and messaging apps, such as Telegram—are engineered in such a way that it is impossible to act against content that is stored on user-operated servers or dispersed across the user community. The IS-affiliated online distributor Nashir News Agency first advertised channels on RocketChat at the tail end of 2018, where it remained active in 2019. At least one explanation for this diversification activity was IS users'

⁷⁶ Robert Bunker and Pamela Ligouri Bunker. 'The Appearance of Three New Radical Islamist English-language Online Magazines: Al Risalah, One Ummah & Voice of Hind.' *Small Wars Journal*, 10 May, 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/appearance-three-new-radical-islamist-english-language-online-magazines-al-risalah-one>.

⁷⁷ Conway, *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2018*, pp.'s 7 – 9.

⁷⁸ Georgia Wells. 'Islamic State Turns to Teen-Friendly TikTok, Adorning Posts with Pink Hearts.' *The Wallstreet Journal*, 21 October, 2019.

⁷⁹ Europol. 2019. *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2019 (TESAT)*. The Hague: Europol.

knowledge that they would likely face more intensive disruption activity by Telegram going forward, which was exactly what happened at the end of the year.

Telegram’s 2019 ‘Islamic State’ Purge

Official IS online content and ‘fan’ content continued to be most easily accessible via the messaging application Telegram for the greater part of 2019. In their FAQ, Telegram states, in response to the question “There’s illegal content on Telegram. How do I take it down?,” “[a]ll Telegram chats and group chats are private amongst their participants. We do not process any requests related to them.” They do however remind users that channels are publicly available and illegal content on these should be reported to Telegram. Also in their FAQ, Telegram explicitly states, in response to the question “Wait! 0_o Do you process take-down requests from third parties?,” “we do block terrorist (e.g. ISIS-related) bots and channels.”⁷¹

In December 2016, Telegram established a dedicated ‘ISIS Watch’ channel, which provides a running

Table 1. Number of IS Bots and Channels Banned from Telegram: December 2018 – Dec. 2019*	
<i>Month</i>	<i>Number of Bots and Channels Banned</i>
1. December 2018	14,531
2. January 2019	9,122
3. February 2019	8,000
4. March 2019	10,990
5. April 2019	9,035
6. May 2019	8,291
7. June 2019	7,612
8. July 2019	6,384
9. August 2019	5,182
10. September 2019	5,154
11. October 2019	7,431
12. November 2019	43,215
13. December 2019	56,186**
TOTAL	191,133
* Per data supplied on Telegram’s official ‘ISIS Watch’ Channel. ** This is the single highest number of removals yet recorded; the November figure is the second highest.	

tally of numbers of “ISIS bots and channels banned.” Prior to December 2018, the highest ever number of monthly bans by Telegram of IS bots and channels was 9,180 in May 2018. A considerable jump in bans took place in December 2018 (see Table 1), which was commented upon by researchers and others at the time. These actions were eclipsed by those taken at the end of 2019 however, when the number of bans in November was nearly six times that of the previous month and increased again in December. The total number of bans in December 2020 was the highest recorded by Telegram to that date, coming in at six times greater than the previous high number reached in May 2018. What accounts for the November and December 2019 purges?

On 21 and 22 November 2019, the European Union Internet Referral Unit’s (EUIRU) 16th Referral Action Day took place at Europol’s headquarters in The Hague, Netherlands. Nine Internet companies, including Telegram, took part in the action. According to a 22 November Europol press release, “Telegram was the online service



provider receiving most of the referral requests during this Action Day. As a result, a significant portion of key actors within the IS network on Telegram was pushed away from the platform.”⁸⁰ The press release went on to say that “[i]n the past year and a half, Telegram has also put forth considerable effort to root out the abusers of the platform by both bolstering its technical capacity in countering malicious content and by establishing a close partnership with Europol.”⁸¹

This “massive cull” was immediately noted by researchers and analysts. Peter King wrote:

Dozens of mirror channels and groups operated by Nashir News Agency which were available to BBC Monitoring stopped distributing IS content overnight 21-22 November as their administrators' accounts had been deleted. A small number of distribution channels survived the cull. They quickly advertised a series of accounts which people were invited to contact to obtain links to new Nashir News Agency channels. New channels then continued posting official IS propaganda on 22 and 23 November, although several were later observed to have been deleted. Caliphate News 24, another outlet for official propaganda, has also been rebuilding its network after suffering significant disruption. While the flow of media output had not been significantly interrupted at the time of writing, the disruption has severely restricted its accessibility and left IS supporters scrambling to try to rebuild their networks.⁸²

A key question for those familiar with the purge was whether momentum would be retained in the medium- to longer-term, as it had not been following the previously mentioned disruption highpoint in December 2018. As Table 1 shows the momentum was kept-up in the shorter-term, extending into December 2019.

Other Jihadis

Description and discussion of online content produced by non-IS jihadis is only a fraction of that produced about IS, due largely to the heightened threat felt to be posed by IS, both in a Western context and globally. As pointed out in previous *Year in Review* reports, this needs to change, especially due to the relative freedom of online action allowed to some of these other groups versus IS. Some trends as regards these other violent jihadis' online activity are discernible however.

IS' significant loss of territory in Iraq and Syria stands can be contrasted with al-Qaeda's relative stability over the same period: “While IS dominated headlines, al-Qaeda has focused on consolidating its influence in both existing and new theatres. As a result, it has succeeded in subsuming a number of franchises in a global movement that runs from North-West Africa to South Asia.”⁸³ Importantly too, for our purposes here, despite their lower profile online presence, al-Qaeda and linked groups' propaganda output remained constant in 2019, with a whole host of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and al-Shabab, continuing to produce and circulate online content.

⁸⁰ Europol. 'Referral Action Day against Islamic State Online Terrorist Propaganda.' *Press Release*, 22 November, 2019, <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/referral-action-day-against-islamic-state-online-terrorist-propaganda>

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Peter King. 'Islamic State's Experiments with the Decentralised Web.' *BBC Monitoring*, 22 March, 2019.

⁸³ Europol, *TESAT 2019*, p.36.



As Europol pointed out as regards 2018, and which still holds true in 2019, “Al-Qaeda sets itself apart from IS in its discourse and presents itself as a level-headed pragmatic group that seeks redress for the people. The organisation is currently focusing more on local concerns as opposed to global jihad and couches its speeches in the context of political realism.”⁸⁴

CONCLUSION

Concerns about the extreme right’s online activity and its potential impacts are now firmly fixed in the public consciousness. In terms of the outlook for 2020, the run-up to the US Presidential Election in November is likely to raise a host of issues for major social media companies, including around moderation of extreme right content.

Also worth watching is TikTok, a relatively new platform that’s gaining in popularity amongst especially teens, which was mentioned herein in respect to its briefly hosting IS-supportive content. The platform, which is quickly growing its user base, is likely to face greater problems with hate and extreme right content being circulated via its service than jihadi content, it is suggested. Their handling of this will be worth following.

Overall, there appears to be a strong correlation between IS’s loss of territory in Iraq and Syria and the decline in online content production, particularly production of official IS videos. In effect, it seems increasingly likely that “the Islamic State’s video production was largely dependent on territorial control. With regard to the near future, this suggests that, although the group will continue to release media productions as it had done before its territorial conquests, it is highly unlikely that the output will ever again reach the level of early 2015.”⁸⁵

Worth noting here again is a point made in previous *Year in Review* reports however, which is that “IS’s media production activity since 2014 has been such that the latter have a very large archive of content to fall back on.”⁸⁶ Nanninga estimates this included 772 official videos alone (by 30 June 2018).⁸⁷

Also important to determine in 2020 will be the emerging medium-term effects of Telegram’s 2019 IS purge. Two things to keep an eye on here will be, firstly, whether Telegram keeps up sufficient momentum that a tipping point is reached and IS users and supporters are forced to abandon the platform and, second, whether as a result of such wholesale disruption or for futureproofing purposes, what platform (or platforms) becomes their new preferred online hub.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Pieter Nanninga. 2019. *Branding a Caliphate in Decline: The Islamic State’s Video Output (2015-2018)*. The Hague: ICCT, p.13.

⁸⁶ Conway, *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2017*, p.3.

⁸⁷ Nanninga, *Branding a Caliphate in Decline*, p.8.



Finally, major social media companies made numerous announcements in 2019, some of which were discussed herein and others of which may have significant impacts on the extremism and terrorism online scenes going forward, but were not analysed in this report. A list of all potentially relevant such announcements, which largely took the form of posts on the companies official Blogs, are listed in Appendix 1. At least two of these are worth drawing further attention to here.

Beginning in January 2019, Facebook began making posts regarding its proposed Oversight Board.⁸⁸ The setting-up of such an independent body could be very consequential for Facebook decision-making around content, including particularly extremist content that falls shy of being terrorist content. In March 2019, Facebook announced, in a Blog post, its intention to pivot towards private groups and messaging,⁸⁹ which is likely to increase the attractiveness of Facebook to extremists and terrorists, whilst also complicating law enforcement investigations, making research in this area increasingly difficult, and reducing the utility and relevance of its Oversight Board before its even been constituted.

⁸⁸ Nick Clegg. 'Charting a Course for an Oversight Board for Content Decisions.' *Facebook Newsroom*, 28 January 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/01/oversight-board/>.

⁸⁹ Mark Zuckerberg. 'A Privacy-Focused Vision for Social Networking.' *Facebook Newsroom*, 6 March, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/vision-for-social-networking/>.



Appendix 1. All Official Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube Blog Posts Published Between 1 Dec. 2018 and 30 Dec. 2019 with (Potential) Bearing Upon Online Extreme Right and Jihadi Activity

All posts accompanied by * referenced in this report.

Date	Title of Post	URL
Facebook		
18 Dec.	An Update on Our Civil Rights Audit	https://about.fb.com/news/2018/12/civil-rights-audit/
28 Dec.	Facts About Content Review on Facebook	https://about.fb.com/news/2018/12/content-review-facts/
23 Jan.	Making Pages More Transparent and Accountable	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/01/making-pages-more-transparent/
28 Jan.	Charting a Course for an Oversight Board for Content Decisions*	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/01/oversight-board/
4 Feb.	What Is Facebook Doing to Address the Challenges It Faces?	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/02/addressing-challenges/
5 Feb.	Banning More Dangerous Organizations from Facebook in Myanmar	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/02/dangerous-organizations-in-myanmar/
25 Feb.	Our Commitment to Our Content Reviewers	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/02/commitment-to-content-reviewers/
26 Feb.	Removing Tommy Robinson's Page and Profile for Violating Our Community Standards	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/02/removing-tommy-robinson/
6 Mar.	A Privacy-Focused Vision for Social Networking*	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/vision-for-social-networking/
18 Mar.	Update on New Zealand	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/update-on-new-zealand/
20 Mar.	A Further Update on New Zealand Terrorist Attack*	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/technical-update-on-new-zealand/
27 Mar.	Standing Against Hate*	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/standing-against-hate/
30 Mar.	Four Ideas to Regulate the Internet	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/four-ideas-regulate-internet/
31 Mar.	Why Am I Seeing This? We Have an Answer for You	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/why-am-i-seeing-this/
1 April	Getting Input on an Oversight Board	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/04/input-on-an-oversight-board/
10 April	Remove, Reduce, Inform: New Steps to Manage Problematic Content	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/04/remove-reduce-inform-new-steps/
14 May	Protecting Facebook Live From Abuse and Investing in Manipulated Media Research	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/05/protecting-live-from-abuse/
15 May	Facebook Joins Other Tech Companies to Support the Christchurch Call to Action	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/05/christchurch-call-to-action/



23 May	An Update on How We Are Doing at Enforcing Our Community Standards	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/05/enforcing-our-community-standards-3/
23 May	Sharing Our Latest Transparency Report	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/05/transparency-report-h2-2018/
23 May	Measuring Prevalence of Violating Content on Facebook	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/05/measuring-prevalence/
23 May	An Independent Report on How We Measure Content Moderation	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/05/dtag-report/
27 June	Global Feedback and Input on the Facebook Oversight Board for Content Decisions	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/06/global-feedback-on-oversight-board/
30 June	A Second Update on Our Civil Rights Audit	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/06/second-update-civil-rights-audit/
24 July	Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism: An Update on Our Progress Two Years on	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/07/global-internet-forum-to-counter-terrorism-an-update-on-our-progress-two-years-on/
20 Aug.	An Update on Senator Kyl's Review of Potential Anti-Conservative Bias	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/08/update-on-potential-anti-conservative-bias/
12 Sept.	Updating the Values That Inform Our Community Standards	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/09/updating-the-values-that-inform-our-community-standards/
17 Sept.	Combating Hate and Extremism	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/09/combating-hate-and-extremism/
17 Sept.	Establishing Structure and Governance for an Independent Oversight Board	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/09/oversight-board-structure/
23 Sept.	Next Steps for the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/09/next-steps-for-gifct/
14 Oct.	European Court Ruling Raises Questions About Policing Speech	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/10/european-court-ruling-raises-questions-about-policing-speech/
13 Nov.	Community Standards Enforcement Report, November 2019 Edition	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/11/community-standards-enforcement-report-nov-2019/
13 Nov.	Continued Progress in Transparency	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/11/continued-progress-in-transparency/
12 Dec.	An Update on Building a Global Oversight Board	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/12/oversight-board-update/
20 Dec.	An Update on Our Efforts to Combat Terrorism Online*	https://about.fb.com/news/2019/12/counterterrorism-efforts-update/
Twitter		
12 Dec.	Evolving our Twitter Transparency Report: Expanded Data and Insights	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2018/evolving-our-twitter-transparency-report.html
29 Jan.	Partnering with Researchers at UC Berkeley to Improve the Use of ML	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/ucberkeley-twitter-ml.html
15 April	A Healthier Twitter: One Year In	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2018/healthupdate.html
16 April	A Healthier Twitter: Progress and More to Do	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/health-update.html



9 May	Key Data and Insights from Our 14th Twitter Transparency Report	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/key-data-and-insights-from-our-14th-twitter-transparency-report.html
15 May	Addressing the Abuse of Tech to Spread Terrorist and Extremist Content	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/addressing-the-abuse-of-tech-to-spread-terrorist-and-extremist-c.html
3 June	Twitter Acquires Fabula AI to Strengthen its Machine Learning Expertise	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/Twitter-acquires-Fabula-AI.html
7 June	Making Our Rules Easier to Understand	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/rules-refresh.html
27 June	Defining Public Interest on Twitter	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/publicinterest.html
11 July	Giving You More Control Over Your Conversations	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2019/morecontrolofconversation.html
15 Oct.	World Leaders on Twitter: Principles & Approach	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/worldleaders2019.html
31 Oct.	15th Transparency Report: Increase in Proactive Enforcement on Accounts	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/twitter-transparency-report-2019.html
21 Nov.	More Control Over Your Conversation: Now Available Globally	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2019/more-control-over-your-conversations-globally.html
13 Dec.	Strengthening our Trust and Safety Council	https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2019/strengthening-our-trust-and-safety-council.html
YouTube		
25 Jan.	Continuing our Work to Improve Recommendations on YouTube	https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/01/continuing-our-work-to-improve.html
19 Feb.	Introducing Our New Strikes System	https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/02/introducing-our-new-strikes-system.html
5 June	Our Ongoing Work to Tackle Hate*	https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/06/our-ongoing-work-to-tackle-hate.html
5 June	Taking a Harder Look at Harassment	https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/06/taking-harder-look-at-harassment.html
24 July	Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism: An update on our progress	https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/07/global-internet-forum-to-counter.html
3 Sept.	The Four Rs of Responsibility, Part 1: Removing Harmful Content	https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/09/the-four-rs-of-responsibility-remove.html
3 Dec.	The Four Rs of Responsibility, Part 2: Raising Authoritative Content and Reducing Borderline Content and Harmful Misinformation	https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/12/the-four-rs-of-responsibility-raise-and-reduce.html
11 Dec.	An Update to Our Harassment Policy	https://youtube.googleblog.com/2019/12/an-update-to-our-harassment-policy.html

Appendix 2. All 2019 VOX-Pol Publications*

Author(s)/Editor(s)	Title and Additional Information
Books	
Maura Conway and Stuart Macdonald (Eds.)	<i>Islamic State's Online Activity and Responses</i> . London: Routledge.
Book Chapters	
Ryan Scrivens and Maura Conway	'The Roles of 'Old' and 'New' Media Tools and Technologies in the Facilitation of Violent Extremism and Terrorism.' In Rutger Leukfeldt and Thomas J. Holt (Eds.), <i>The Human Factor of Cybercrime</i> . New York: Routledge.
Reports	
Reem Ahmed and Daniele PISOIU	<i>How Extreme Is The European Far Right? Investigating Overlaps in the German Far-Right Scene on Twitter</i> . Dublin: VOX-Pol.
Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan McNair	<i>Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends</i> . The Hague: ICT.
Dounia Malouly	<i>Reconciling Impact and Ethics: An Ethnography of Research in Violent Online Political Extremism</i> . Dublin: VOX-Pol.
Maura Conway	<i>Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2018: The Year in Review</i> . Dublin: VOX-Pol.
Journal Articles	
Arya Devanshu Arya, Stevan Rudinac and Marcel Worring	'Predicting Behavioural Patterns in Discussion Forums using Deep Learning on Hypergraphs.' <i>2019 International Conference on Content-Based Multimedia Indexing (CBMI)</i>
Paul Gill <i>et al.</i>	'What Do Closed Source Data Tell Us About Lone Actor Terrorist Behavior? A Research Note.' <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> [Online First]
Zoey Reeve	'Engaging With Online Extremist Material: Experimental Evidence.' <i>Terrorism and Political Violence</i> [Online First]
Eviane Leidig	'Immigrant, Nationalist And Proud: A Twitter Analysis Of Indian Diaspora Supporters For Brexit and Trump.' <i>Media and Communication</i> 7(1)

* All publications listed are linked from VOX-Pol's Publications page: <https://www.voxpol.eu/publications>. Most are free-to-access.