

DRIVE

Resisting Radicalisation Through Inclusion

Methodology Report on Online Mapping

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Project information

DRIVE project information	
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1. Introduction

With higher rates of social media and other online platform use among young people in north-western Europe, more and more find that the online world intersects with their offline world in multiple ways (Khosravinik & Unger 2016, 206). Digital and media technologies are part of people's daily lives, creating new configurations of space, personhood and new possibilities for social and political mobilisation (Waltorp 2020). These digital technologies, through both explicit and implicit mechanisms, are also capable of shaping patterns of individual and group thinking as well as psychosocial dimensions and conceptions of individual and collective identity, belonging, and perceptions of justice/injustice and perceived threat/safety (DeMarinis and Boyd-MacMillan 2019; Boyd-MacMillan and DeMarinis 2020; Boyd-MacMillan et al. 2019).

In tandem with the extraordinary rise of the digital in the lives of people, far right and Islamist activists have also moved to the internet, creating and interacting with websites, blogs, forums, social media, image-boards and gaming platforms that are used in processes of belonging, recruitment and propaganda. The threshold for online activism is low because participation is cheap and easy. Additionally, there are fewer social repercussions from screen-mediated activism, where users produce and circulate content fast and anonymously with global reach. This points to a shift to a post-organisational reality, whereby online structures and subcultural milieus could be equally important in processes of radicalisation as a connection to groups in the physical world (Guhl and Davey 2020).

In these formative virtual communities, activists produce forms of belonging and share and adopt various symbols and frameworks of interpretation (Malthaner and Waldmann 2014). The organisers of these communities are skilled in understanding, as social psychologists Webber and Kruglanski (2018) note, the individual needs that motivate an engagement in political violence, the ideological narrative that justifies political violence, and the social network that influences people's decisions along the pathways to extremism.

2. Researching the entanglements of online and offline spaces in the DRIVE project

In the DRIVE project, we will work with 320 young people between the age of 18 and 25. These young people, so-called 'digital natives', are born into an era of constant connectivity and utilise multiple technologies to negotiate belonging and forge communities. The online spaces and digital lives of youngsters cannot be ignored in multi-sited research on far-right and Islamist milieus, as online spaces impact processes of identification, polarisation, radicalisation, and mobilisation.



To connect offline and online spaces, we will build on a body of literature associated with ‘digital ethnography’ (Horst and Miller 2012; Kozinets 2015; C. Hine 2015; Markham 2013; Boellstorff et al. 2012; Pink et al. 2015). In brief, it is asserted that digital ethnography challenges the traditional notion of a fixed field-site ‘as an object, place, or whole - and [allows us to] start thinking more about movement, flow, and process’ (Markham 2013, 438). The study of digital flows and movement is grounded. That is, flows are human products that can be traced to specific sites.

A study by UNESCO from a public mental health and public health perspective points to the connection between online and offline interaction by noting that social media channels are used for creating interactive platforms, disseminating violent content, identifying potential participants, producing false information, fostering one-to-one dialogue, and even for forming offline ties with individuals with the aim of recruitment (Alava, Frau-Meigs, and Hassan 2017). The importance of understanding the public health and public mental health implications of online and offline interactions are especially important for creating and reinforcing what has been described as a virtual ‘echo chamber’ (Davies et al. 2016) of extreme views and ideas through which unacceptable behaviours become normalised (Denoeux and Carter 2009; Hassan et al. 2020). This virtual echo chamber can then influence real-life actions as the meaning-making patterns (DeMarinis 2018) are transposed into everyday reality.

Ethnographic researchers within the team will select *public social media platforms and websites* and work together with public mental health team researchers to conduct qualitative and as possible quantitative analyses. Researchers will analyse user behaviour and content production of people engaged in far right and Islamist milieus, in particular focusing on activists, monitoring specific social media platforms and websites at predetermined time points. The analysis will also include psychosocial and public mental health assessments of the community-forming dimensions of these platforms and websites and the framing of both literal and symbolic actions, narratives and ritual components of belonging embedded in them. The digital landscape is constantly changing and specific groups and platforms will be selected according to prior knowledge of the most relevant far right and radical Islamist virtual communities in each country.

As with digital ethnography, public mental health and public health models built from a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) framework (Minkler & Wallerstein 2008) that allows for the interactive flow between all relevant spaces, both physical and online, and the global and local shaping of community belonging and engagement. DRIVE focus groups and a pilot intervention will be designed within a CBPR framework for maximum engagement with participants and coherence across the multi-disciplinary research methods. Digital ethnographic research, along with public mental health research, will precede the focus groups and pilot intervention.



3. Preliminary selection of social media platforms

In setting out the different online spaces in which radical groups meet and exchange ideas, it is important to take into account certain asymmetries between far right and Islamist online milieus. Islamist online networks have suffered heavily from social media and security service crackdowns (EUROPOL 2020, 73). In the UK, for example, the online networks associated with *al-Muhajiroun*, *Islam4UK* and *Muslims against Crusades* have been banned. In the Netherlands, security surveillance and public scrutiny resulted in the dwindling of the online public networks associated with *Sharia4Holand*, *Behind Bars*, and *Street Dawah*. Although the public presence of these online networks decreased (with some exceptions remaining, including <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.dk/> in Denmark), there is a likelihood of continued activity in encrypted spaces and online backrooms. Consequently, it is unclear what the reach of these groups is at the moment, what their current activities are, or whether previous popular platforms have been replaced by other online networks (e.g. the Facebook group *Project A* replaced some of the securitised Dutch online networks until the page was banned). Some speakers, including Mohyeldeen Mohammad in Norway and Ubu Usamah at-Thahabi in the United Kingdom, continue to spread extreme content on YouTube. More research is needed to identify the current online networks associated with extreme Islamist milieus in Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom.

Europol (2020, 73) reports that right-wing online networks have not been targeted in the same manner. Consequently, right-wing individuals and groups enjoy much more freedom to share ideas and build networks in public online forums. As an unintended consequence, these networks are easier to identify and track for research purposes. The following outlines some of the online forums, social media sites, both mainstream and fringed, that are relevant for the study of far right actors in Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom. As the project progresses, more research will be directed at the investigation of extreme Islamist associated online networks.

Social Media

Facebook: The world largest social media platform.

Examples of public groups where user interaction and posting practices can be observed:

NO: [Allianseungdommen Norge](#) | Facebook: The page of the youth branch on the Norwegian, far right, anti-Semitic, micro political party “Alliance”

NO [Stopp islamiseringen av Norge \(SIAN\)](#) | Facebook: The page of Stop the Islamisation of Norway



DK: Stram Kurs Ungdom - <https://www.facebook.com/Stram-Kurs-Ungdom-1893220547665102/>. The page of the youth branch of the Danish extreme nationalist and anti-Muslim party

DK: Frihedens Stemme - <https://www.facebook.com/frihedensstemme/>. Page associated with Stram Kurs.

DK: Stop Islamisation Of Europe (SIO) - <https://www.facebook.com/groups/sioeinternatioal/>. The page of one of Denmark's oldest anti-Islamic groups.

NL: Rechts in Verzet (Right in Resistance) - <https://www.facebook.com/rechtsinverzet>. The page for the Amsterdam-based far right group.

NL: Erkenbrand - <https://www.facebook.com/erkenbrandnl/>. The page for the alt-right study association.

UK: Britain First, English Defence League, British National Party and a host of others were banned by Facebook in April 2021.

4chan: Anonymous English-language imageboard which has been a central generator of online culture and memes since its inception (Hine et al. 2017). The combination of anonymity with limited moderation has made *chan* platforms gathering places for an international community of far right activists who rapidly and anonymously produce and spread fascist ideas of racial purity and calls for accelerating a race war in real life (IRL). The 4chan's Politically Incorrect (or /pol/) discussion board has strong ties to far right extremist ideology. According to 4chan's own statistics, around half of the users self-identify as being based in the United States, followed by the UK, Canada and Australia. While /pol/ is primarily an English-speaking board, there are still users from many non-English speaking countries – including the Netherlands (place 6), Germany, Brazil, Russia and Norway (place 13) and several Eastern European countries.

8chan / 8kun: Another anonymous imageboard, created as a more free speech-friendly version of 4chan. The Christchurch, Poway and El Paso lone actors all announced their attacks on 8chan. After the El Paso attack, the site went down but was later rebranded as 8kun.

Telegram: A cloud-based instant messaging service. Telegram has limited content moderation policies, only banning the promotion of violence on public channels and the sharing of illegal pornographic material (Guhl and Davey 2020). This made it attractive for both far right and radical Islamist extremists. At DRIVE we will select the *public channels* of movements, organisation and individuals.



4. Methodological and ethical implications

Digital environments are neither the only or main factor in radicalisation, nor do they produce radicalising effects deterministically. Rather, users should be understood as active participants who select and embrace content (Archetti 2015), criticise one another and contribute to existing narratives. With the digital ethnographic as well as the public mental health approaches, there will be ethical challenges, including those related to the choice of online field sites, informed consent and the protection of privacy.

When researchers “lurk” by observing and gathering data, they do not gain participants’ knowledge and consent, conflicting with the traditional ethnographic practice of informed consent, which is not possible in some of the public far right and radical Islamist online platforms. When informed consent is difficult or impossible to obtain, the practice of anonymisation must be rigorous. Some researchers propose that using publically available electronic data, even if accessing personal information, does not constitute a violation of privacy (von Benson 2019). However, this perspective does not adequately reflect the researcher’s ethical imperative to protect research subjects. In the DRIVE project, we will strive to protect the identities of young activists and safeguard them from potential harm. Even if we collect data at publically available online sites, activists engage in personal interactions and often discuss personal or sensitive content. We will paraphrase participants’ quotations, changing details of both online groups and the data to assure participants’ confidentiality and privacy. The sophistication of web search engines and the archived history of webpages means that published research articles can be traced back to quotes in the public forums in which they were posted (Thompson et al 2021).

We will combine online fieldwork with field observation data collected at protest events, political rallies and social gatherings, discussed on the observed platforms or learned through other research methods (e.g., interviews). As with all DRIVE research, these observations will adhere to strict safeguarding and risk management protocols. More than a coding exercise, all researchers will work through and with the data as it emerges from online and in-person observation, or online and in-person interaction, to produce ethnographic and public health qualitative (and as possible quantitative) analyses.

The DRIVE researchers are aware of the potential emotional burden of relationship-building within an ethnographic (Copland and Creese 2015) and a community-focused public mental health project (Aggarwahl 2019) that spans field visits, private face-to-face encounters and digital communities. In addition to the safeguarding and risk management protocols, we will use the consortium, the advisory and ethics advisory boards for team support and advice.



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