RESOLVE
NETWORK

The European Far-right Online:

An Exploratory Twitter Outlink Analysis of German & French Far-Right Online Ecosystems

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INTRODUCTION

Focus on violent and non-violent activities and content in online spaces has yielded valuable insights into the evolution of extremist exploitation of social media and the internet. Over the past decade, much attention has been dedicated to understanding jihadist—particularly the so-called Islamic State's—use of popular social media platforms and encrypted messaging apps to spread propaganda and entice followers. In recent years, however, attention to far-right extremist exploitation of online spaces has been growing.[1]

As Conway, Scrivens, and Macnair have comprehensively documented,[2] right-wing extremist (a subset of the broader far-right) online communities have a lengthy history, transitioning from dial-up bulletin board systems; to static websites and online forums; to social media platforms, messaging and other communication "apps." While far-right online communities were and still are largely decentralized, these communities can be considered loosely interconnected, their online interdependence tracing back to the "hot-links" page on the original Stormfront internet forum where outlinks to like-minded websites and forums were posted. Far-right, including right-wing extremist, online communities have since been described as an "ecosystem," consisting of various types of online spaces or "entities" (e.g., websites, social media platforms).[3] Still, the actual extent to which these networks are interdependent or overlapping, as opposed to largely insulated groupings, platforms, and activities, remains to be fully interrogated. Doing so requires more localized research efforts, focused on identifying the nature of content shared and platforms used in far-right communities and ecosystems online to more fully examine interconnections between them.

Until recently, major social media platforms, such as Facebook[4] and Twitter,[5] have been the most accessible entities within far-right and extremist online ecosystems, but increased efforts to remove right-wing extremist communities and content from these platforms has resulted in some migration to "dark social" (e.g., encrypted messaging applications)[6] and various other types of online spaces. While some newer

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1   Jakob Guhl, Julia Ebner, and Jan Rau, *The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/the-online-ecosystem-of-the-german-far-right/; Stephane J. Baele, Lewys Brace, and Travis G. Coan, "Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem: An Analytical Framework and Research Agenda," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2020): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2020.1862895.

2   Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, and Logan Macnair, *Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, 2019), https://icct.nl/publication/right-wing-extremists-persistent-online-presence-history-and-contemporary-trends/.

3   Baele, Brace, and Coan, "Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem."

4   Ofra Klein and Jasper Muis, "Online Discontent: Comparing Western European Far-Right Groups on Facebook," *European Societies* 21, no. 4 (2019): 540–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494293.

5   J.M. Berger, *The Alt-Right Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Audience for Alt-Right Content on Twitter* (Dublin: VOX-Pol, 2018), https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/AltRightTwitterCensus.pdf; Reem Ahmed and Daniela Pisoiu, "Uniting the Far Right: How the Far-Right Extremist, New Right, and Populist Frames Overlap on Twitter—A German Case Study," *European Societies* (2020): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2020.1818112.

6   Kevin Grisham, "Far-Right Groups Move to Messaging Apps as Tech Companies Crack Down on Extremist Social Media," *The Conversation*, January 22,, 2021, https://theconversation.com/far-right-groups-move-to-messaging-apps-as-tech-companies-crack-down-on-extremist-social-media-153181.

studies have focused on understanding far-right activity on individual online platforms (e.g., Twitter, Telegram)[7] others have taken a cross-platform approach to understanding far-right engagement online.[8] However, as noted by Guhl, Ebner, and Rau, "further cross-platform research of the uses, networks, audiences and cultures that exist not just within, but between platforms, is required to build the evidence base required to design effective responses."[9]

One way to accomplish this is through examining outlinking behaviors or the posting of links that direct users of one platform to content on other websites or platforms, which enables us to identify both the types of online spaces being trafficked and content being engaged with by a cohort of far-right users at a given time. Importantly, for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike, ecosystem(s)-based analyses of the online far-right also allow for teasing out the extent to which violent extremist—including racially- and ethnically motivated violent extremist (REMVE)—content is present within them. Doing so is not only crucial in understanding the extent to which right-wing extremist and REMVE content is being spread within broader far-right online ecosystems, but also in determining whether broader far-right and REMVE online activities and interactions might actually overlap. Both of these questions are significant to crafting policies that recognize and are appropriately nuanced to address the heterogeneity of online far-right communities and users.

Seeking to further explore these questions and the nature of European far-right online ecosystems overall, this report examines the outlinking activity of identified pro-far-right users among the followers of the official Twitter accounts of two prominent far-right European political parties, Germany's *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and France's *Rassemblement National* (RN). To be clear, this report does not broadly imply that AfD, RN, or their networks of supporters are themselves violent extremists, but instead identifies AfD and RN as subsets of the broader far-right, which includes far-right individuals, parties, groups, and movements, and their more extremist elements.[10] As such, the official Twitter accounts of AfD and RN were chosen as jumping-off points, in this case, to identify a curated sample of the two parties' *explicitly pro-far-right* Twitter followers and thus the broader far-right online ecosystem(s) within which those followers are active.

Twitter was chosen as the initial data collection site for this study, as opposed to other platforms such as Telegram or Gab, given the comparatively greater accessibility of Twitter content for research purposes.[11]

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7   Mathilda Åkerlund, "The Importance of Influential Users in (Re)Producing Swedish Far-Right Discourse on Twitter," *European Journal of Communication* 35, no. 6 (2020): 613–628, https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323120940909; Ahmed and Pisoiu, "Uniting the Far Right"; Caterina Froio and Bharath Ganesh, "The Transnationalisation of Far Right Discourse on Twitter," *European Societies* 21, no. 4 (2019): 513–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494295; Jakob Guhl and Jacob Davey, *A Safe Space to Hate: White Supremacist Mobilisation on Telegram* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-publications/a-safe-space-to-hate-white-supremacist-mobilisation-on-telegram/; Aleksandra Urman and Stefan Katz, "What They Do in the Shadows: Examining the Far-Right Networks on Telegram," *Information, Communication & Society* (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1803946.

8   Guhl, Ebner, and Rau, *The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right*.

9   Ibid.

10   Tore Bjørgo and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, *Extreme-Right Violence and Terrorism: Concepts, Patterns, and Responses* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, 2019), https://icct.nl/publication/extreme-right-violence-and-terrorism-concepts-patterns-and-responses/.

11   J.M. Berger, *The Alt-Right Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Audience for Alt-Right Content on Twitter* (VOX-Pol, 2018), https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/AltRightTwitterCensus.pdf; Ahmed and Pisoiu, "Uniting the Far Right."

What is more, Twitter can also be considered a type of "gateway" due partly to its 280 characters per tweet limit (i.e. micro-blogging function) to content and engagement on other, potentially less regulated, platforms.[12] Given this, attention was paid in this research to identifying the presence of outlinks to explicitly violent extremist content or actors hosted on other platforms.

Key Questions and Aims

This report focuses on the outlinking activity of identified pro-far-right followers of AfD and RN to analyze three main questions:

- What types of online spaces do the two parties' confirmed far-right Twitter followers link to?

- What is the nature of the content being outlinked to by these supporters and do any of these outlinks direct users to explicitly extremist or REMVE content?

- What are the similarities and/or differences between AfD and RN's pro-far-right Twitter followers with regards to the types of online spaces they outlink to, the characteristics of these online entities, and the content housed within them?

Findings from this report point to the importance of ecological approaches to advance a more thorough and nuanced understanding of broader far-right ecosystems in Germany and France and real or potential violent extremist exploitation of them. Importantly, research conducted for this report found no discernable evidence within the data collected that pro-far-right AfD and RN Twitter followers outlinked to explicitly violent extremist online spaces or content. While numerous qualifications, detailed in our discussion and conclusion, attach to this finding, our results nonetheless underline the importance of avoiding over-conflating the online activity, engagement, and ecosystems of political parties' far-right followers with more fringe violent right-wing extremist individuals, groups, and movements, with concomitant implications for policy and practice.

Having said this, the research turned-up a preponderance of content that, while not necessarily explicitly violent extremist in nature, was hateful or "othering" in its rhetoric and/or fell into the category of disinformation. Often this content took the form of both mainstream and fringe media-produced "news" articles. These findings, when combined, highlight the importance of adopting regulatory and other approaches that distinguish between violent extremist, including REMVE, activity and content, online dissemination of and engagement with hateful content, and the context in which otherwise legitimate news content is posted and spread.

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12   Stuart Macdonald et al., "A Study of Outlinks Contained in Tweets Mentioning Rumiyah," *Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology* no. 2 (2019), https://gnet-research.org/2020/01/07/a-study-of-outlinks-contained-in-tweets-mentioning-rumiyah/.

The report is divided into six parts:

- **Part one** provides an overview of this report's conceptualization of "far-right" and rationale for choosing the official Twitter accounts of AfD and RN as a starting point for examining the European far-right's outlinking behaviors and wider online ecosystem(s), including potential overlaps with violent extremists;

- **Part two** provides an overview of literature related to the study of far-right online ecologies and outlinking behaviors is supplied;

- **Part three** summarizes our methodology, including details of data collection and an overview of the final dataset;

- **Part four** presents the findings from our triple-layered ecological analysis, which addresses both the service types and ideological types of the top-level domains outlinked to by our sample of explicitly far-right AfD and RN Twitter followers, the technical types (i.e., webpage, video, page, channel, etc.) of a sample of the content outlinked to by these followers, and the ideological nature of the most-tweeted outlinks;

- **Part five** discusses these findings and their relevance for policymakers and researchers;

- **The conclusion** underlines our core findings and discusses avenues for future research.

THE EUROPEAN FAR-RIGHT

Conceptualizing the "Far-right"

Debate exists around the meaning of terms such as "far-right," "radical right," and "right-wing extremism," particularly given the variety of actors, ideologies, and behaviors that may (or may not) fall within the ambit of these, as well as an increasing tendency to associate the terms with illegal and/or violent extremist activity.[13] While Carter suggests that there is "a high degree of consensus" among scholars' definitions,[14] no universally accepted definitions of the terms exist. And each has been employed, at various times, as blanket terms, simultaneously describing political ideologies, parties, and movements *and* violent rhetoric and actions. This tendency to use the terms interchangeably, despite fundamental differences that can exist in the ideologies, motives, and propensity to violence both within and among different right-wing parties, groups, and movements, can be problematic.[15]

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13   Anders Ravik Jupskås and Iris Beau Segers, "What is Right-Wing Extremism?," *C-REX Compendium*, August 31, 2020, https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/compendium/what-is-right-wing-extremism.html.

14   Elisabeth Carter, "Right-Wing Extremism/Radicalism: Reconstructing the Concept," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 174, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2018.1451227.

15   Tore Bjørgo and Jacob Aasland Ravndal, *Extreme-Right Violence and Terrorism: Concepts, Patterns, and Responses* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism—The Hague, 2019), 1–22, https://icct.nl/publication/extreme-right-violence-and-terrorism-concepts-patterns-and-responses/.

Seeking to supplant these difficulties, and in line with Mudde, Bjørgo and Ravndal, we outline a framework that conceptualizes "far-right" as an umbrella term, one that is typified by nativist and authoritarian beliefs, while also differentiating between "radical" and "extremist"—not to mention violent—elements within it. This view is consistent with the views of both Lee[16] and Lakhani and James,[17] the latter of whom suggest that it is important to:

> [appreciate] the value of considering the label of 'far-right' as an umbrella term … [as it] enables acknowledgement and engagement with both the fluidity of these organisations, and their ideologies, and the difficulties faced by academics and practitioners alike in distinguishing between the multifaceted forms in which they manifest.[18]

This report adopts a similar conceptualization of the overarching term "far-right," recognizing the heterogeneity of the actors and ideas it describes. In summary:

- We understand the **"far right"** to be situated on the "right-wing" of the global political spectrum and sharing "a core ideology of nationalism, xenophobia, welfare chauvinism, and law and order."[19] We use this term broadly to identify groups, ideologies, content, and individuals falling within that ideological spectrum. This includes the AfD and RN political parties.
- **"REMVE" or "violent right-wing extremist,"** on the other hand, refers to a more specific, fringe subset of the far right, comprised of far-right individuals, groups, movements, or content that explicitly legitimate, promote, or support violence.

To be clear, the report does not apply an extremist or violent label to the users, parties, or content discussed, unless they have explicitly called for or sought to legitimate violence or racially and ethnically motivated acts of violent extremism. Nor does the report advance analyses and recommendations related to violent extremism or REMVE, except as appropriate given the data collected.

It is worth reiterating that while the term "far-right" is used broadly, it does not presuppose a direct relationship or association between the groups, ideologies, content, and individuals it is used to define. Indeed, there are notable distinctions between the actors, ideas, and outcomes that can be categorized underneath the far-right umbrella,[20] including those that are otherwise at odds with one another for various reasons. While elements of the far right may react to one another, operate in the same online spaces,

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16 Benjamin Lee, *Overview of the Far-Right* (Lancaster University: CREST, 2019), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/816692/Ben_Lee_-_Overview_of_the_far_right.pdf.

17 Suraj Lakhani and Natalie James, "'Prevent Duty': Empirical Reflections on the Challenges of Addressing Far-Right Extremism within Secondary Schools and Colleges in the UK," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 14, no. 1 (2021): 67-89, https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2021.1876550.

18 Ibid., 4.

19 See, for example: Cas Mudde, "Right-Wing Extremism Analysed: A comparative analysis of the ideologies of three alleged right-wing extremist parties (NPD, NDP, CP'86)," *European Journal of Political Research* 27, no. 2 (1995): 203-224, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1995.tb00636.x.

20 Jupskås and Segers, "What is Right-Wing Extremism?"

or share similar political stances, assuming that far-right political parties and more fringe, extremist, or REMVE elements of the far right are analogous or directly linked without concrete evidence risks overlooking these dynamics and over conflating and/or confusing otherwise distinct entities and the legality or illegality of their activities. Simply put, while mainstream political parties, extremists, and REMVE actors, ideologies, and actions may all fall within the broader far-right umbrella, and even intersect at times, they can, and often do, remain largely distinct from one another. Further discussion on this, as it pertains to AfD and RN specifically and with regard to the data collected and analyzed for this study, is provided below.

AfD, RN, and the European Far-right Scene

Europe's far-right scene encompasses an extensive—at times interconnected—ideological grouping of individuals and organizational types, from political parties that have achieved electoral success, to extreme right actors who oppose democracy, to REMVE groups that advocate for and/or carry out violence, namely against immigrant and ethnic and racial minorities perceived to be part of the "out-group." The metaphor of the 'Overton window' (i.e., "the range of political ideas and policy solutions considered acceptable by the public at any given time") is routinely used to conceptualize the normalization of far-right narratives.[21] On this analysis, the mainstreaming of far-right political parties has shifted this window to allow for more extreme and/or radical views to be expressed in public. As a result, overlaps are apparent between the rhetoric used by these parties and that of right-wing extremist groups,[22] and even terrorists,[23] with the important distinction that political party rhetoric, by and large, does not explicitly condone or call for violence.

"A major surge of electoral successes"[24] for Europe's far-right political parties ensured their transition from the political fringes to the mainstream. According to von Beyme,[25] the growth of Europe's "populist" political parties began in the 1980s with the political advancement of parties such as France's *Front National* (now *Rassemblement National*). After initially facing political restrictions, some of these parties adopted more moderate and respectable facades, allowing them to grow into more stable and legitimate

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21 Maura Conway, "Routing the Extreme Right: Challenges for Social Media Platforms," *RUSI Journal* 165, no. 1 (2020): 111, https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2020.1727157; Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2020), 45.

22 See, for example: Sophie Gaston, "Far-Right Extremism in the Populist Age," *Demos Briefing Paper*, May 23, 2017, https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Demos-Briefing-Paper-Far-Right-Extremism-2017.pdf; Ahmed and Pisoiu, "Uniting the Far Right."

23 Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, *'The Great Replacement': The Violent Consequences of Mainstream Extremism* (London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2019), https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Great-Replacement-The-Violent-Consequences-of-Mainstreamed-Extremism-by-ISD.pdf.

24 Daniel Koehler, "Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism in Europe: Current Developments and Issues for the Future," *PRISM* 6, no. 2 (2016): 87, https://cco.ndu.edu/PRISM/PRISM-Volume-6-no-2/Article/839011/right-wing-extremism-and-terrorism-in-europe-current-developments-and-issues-fo/.

25 Klaus von Beyme, "Right-Wing Extremism in Post-War Europe," *West European Politics* 11, no. 2 (1988): 1-18, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402388808424678.

political organizations.[26] Still, research suggests that the political agendas of the contemporary iterations of these parties have actually become more, rather than less, radical over time.[27] Such parties garnered increased influence Europe-wide in the wake of the so-called "refugee crisis," which provided an opportunity through which they could further rationalize nationalist and xenophobic policy agendas.[28]

This is certainly the case for Germany's AfD and France's RN. In 2017, AfD identified multiculturalism as "a serious threat to social space and the survival of the nation state as a cultural unit."[29] In the same year, AfD became the third largest German political party, gaining 12.6% of the vote in the Federal Elections,[30] suggesting they held significant political and societal influence at the time. In March 2020 however, Germany's domestic intelligence agency, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution or *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (BfV), put the most extreme section of the party, referred to as "Der Flügel" ("The Wing") under surveillance, classifying the now-dissolved branch[31] as an "extremist entity."[32] In March 2021, the BfV expanded its surveillance efforts, placing the entire party under national surveillance "over concerns that the influence of extreme forces within the party is growing."[33] Attempts to nationally surveil the entire AfD were suspended by a German court a few days after they were announced.[34] However, in March 2022, the ruling suspending surveillance of the party was overturned by the Administrative Court of Cologne, which upheld the BfV's "right to surveil the populist far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) as part of its remit to monitor extremism,"[35] upholding the categorization of the group as a "suspicious entity."[36]

RN's use of far-right rhetoric similarly dates back over 30 years. While RN was more outspoken about concerns with migration and multiculturalism in the past than it is today,[37] its ties to extremist organiza-

26 Nicole Berbuir, Marcel Lewandowsky, and Jasmin Siri, "The AfD and Its Sympathisers: Finally a Right-Wing Populist Movement in Germany?" *German Politics* 24, no.2 (2015): 154–178, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2014.982546.

27 Tjitske Akkerman and Matthijs Rooduijn, "Pariahs or Partners? Inclusion and Exclusion of Radical Right Parties and the Effects on Their Policy Positions," *Political Studies* 63, no. 5 (2015): 1140–1157, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12146.

28 Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Wiley, 2019).

29 Alternative für Deutschland, "Manifesto for Germany: The Political Programme of the Alternative for Germany," 2017, 46, https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/111/2017/04/2017-04-12_afd-grundsatzprogramm-englisch_web.pdf.

30 Charles Lees, "The 'Alternative for Germany': The Rise of Right-Wing Populism at the Heart of Europe," *Politics* 38, no. 3 (2018): 295-310, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395718777718.

31 "Germany's Far-right AfD to Dissolve Extreme 'Wing' Faction," *DW,* March 20, 2020, https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-afd-to-dissolve-extreme-wing-faction/a-52864683.

32 Joseph Nasr, "Germany Designates Radical Wing of Far-right AfD as 'Extremist Entity,'" *Reuters*, March 12, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-security/germany-designates-radical-wing-of-far-right-afd-as-extremist-entity-idUSKBN20Z1SW.

33 Laurenz Gehrke, "Germany's Far-Right AfD Files Lawsuit to Avoid Security Service Surveillance," *Politico*, January 22, 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/germany-afd-lawsuits-against-security-service-surveillance/.

34 "German Court Suspends Surveillance of Far-Right AfD, For Now," *DW,* March 5, 2021, *https://www.dw.com/en/german-court-suspends-surveillance-of-far-right-afd-for-now/a-56785125*.

35 Elizabeth Schumacher, "Germany's Far-right AfD Can Be Put Under Surveillance," *DW*, March 8, 2022, https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-afd-can-be-put-under-surveillance/a-61058359.

36 Ibid.

37 Peter Davies, *The National Front in France: Ideology, Discourse and Power* (Routledge, 2012).

tions such as Generation Identity[38] suggest that RN's connection to Europe's right-wing extremist scene likely remains strong.

Despite this, RN and AfD both largely fall under the category of far-right political actors and for the purposes of this report that is how they are categorized. While ties between far-right political parties like AfD and RN and extremist actors, as detailed above, have been alleged, the extent of their connections is not necessarily clear cut. In some cases, the extremist entities to which RN and AfD are speculated to have or known to have had previous ties (including Generation Identity in the case of RN and Der Flügel in the case of AfD) have been banned or surveilled for inciting hatred and inciting violence that could motivate or inspire violent attacks.[39] Recent court rulings related to the AfD also spark additional questions as to whether the political party should or can be categorized as an extremist political entity, rather than just a far-right party. Regardless of the categorization, however, based on their rhetoric and behaviors, it appears likely that both parties, while not necessarily violent or extreme, contribute to mainstreaming far-right anti-immigration and ethnonationalist sentiments—both online and off.

Examining this further, this study focuses on confirmed far-right Twitter followers of both AfD and RN. Both parties and their confirmed far-right followers can be considered a component of European far-right online ecosystems, based on the conceptualizations above. The content they promote and the outlinks they utilize across platforms, therefore, offer us a window of sorts into the nature of broader German and French online far-right ecosystems and the content shared within them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies of extremist online ecologies via followers' outlinking patterns have yielded useful results. Several research projects[40] have, for example, analyzed the outlinking patterns of jihadist groups, including the so-called "Islamic State" (IS), the Taliban, and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, with overlapping findings in several areas. For example, Conway et al.[41] found that jihadists included in their sample from Twitter outlinked to a wide range of "types" of other online spaces, including other (both large and known, and smaller and relatively unknown) social media sites, websites, messaging/telephony sites, and con-

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38 "How the Violent Far-Right Infiltrated France's National Rally," *Al Jazeera,* December 10, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/10/how-the-violent-far-right-infiltrated-frances-national-rally. It should also be noted that on March 3, 2021, the French Interior Ministry banned Generation Identity on the instructions of President Macron; for more, see: Jules Darmanin, "France bans far-right group Generation Identity," *Politico,* March 3, 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/france-bans-far-right-group-generation-identity/.

39 Kim Wilsher, "France bans far-right 'paramilitary' group Génération Identitaire," *The Guardian*, March 3, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/03/france-bans-far-right-paramilitary-group-generation-identitaire; "Germany to spy on far-right AfD's Flügel faction," *BBC News,* March 12, 2020, *https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51850840*.

40 Maura Conway et al., "Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and Its Impacts," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42, no. 1/2 (2019): 141–160, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003015406-8; Maura Conway et al., "A Snapshot of the Syrian Jihadi Online Ecology: Differential Disruption, Community Strength, and Preferred Other Platforms," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2021): 1-17, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610x.2020.1866736; Stuart Macdonald et al., "A Study of Outlinks Contained in Tweets Mentioning Rumiyah."

41 Conway et al., "A Snapshot of the Syrian Jihadi Online Ecology."

tent hosting platforms.[42] These—and similar studies—underlined the diversity of the jihadist online ecology, whereas prior studies were very narrowly focused on content appearing only on major mainstream social media platforms, particularly Twitter, and, more recently, the messaging application Telegram.

Limiting analysis to content appearing on a single platform overlooks the broader online ecosystem across which users interact. It constrains our ability not only to understand which online spaces users are gravitating towards at any given time and why but also to track potential or actual migration of users from one platform to another. This can occur when, for example, more extremist or violent content that violates some platforms' terms of service and/or community guidelines is known to remain accessible on some other service(s).

While attention to outlinking in previous studies of jihadist online behaviors has provided us with valuable insight into their online activities, content, strategies, and movement, there remains a dearth of comparable research on the outlinking patterns of far-right groups.[43] Consequently, a gap exists in our understanding of both *where* far-right users are directing followers using outlinks—that is, what types of online entities they are linking to and using—and *what* they are providing links to—that is, what types of content is housed within those links.

Based on the little research that does exist on the far right's use of outlinking, it is argued that their networks are highly connected across different countries and political contexts. For instance, in a study that traced the website outlinking patterns of extreme right groups from six different European countries, Pavan and Cainai[44] found that outlinking to other groups' websites was used to build relationships and coordinate. Similarly, in a more recent study that examined the use of outlinking by "right-wing digital news sites" from six different European countries, Heft et al.[45] highlighted connections between the sites that essentially formed them into a transnational network of far-right information sites. In contrast, Froio and Ganesh[46] examined the retweets from Twitter followers of far-right parties in four European countries and found that "Twitter activity [remained] mostly limited within national borders."[47]

Though these studies are meaningful contributions to the growing research agenda surrounding the far-right online ecosystem, each focuses on a single type of online space: websites of extreme-right groups, right-wing news websites, and activity within Twitter (i.e., retweet activity), respectively. Overlooking

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42 Similarly, Macdonald et al.'s work exploring IS's use of Twitter to disseminate its online magazine, Rumiyah, found that IS employed a primary tactic whereby they "post[ed] outlinks to a large number of different file-sharing sites. Most of these sites were smaller platforms, such as justpaste.it" (Macdonald et al., "A Study of Outlinks," 2).

43 Baele, Brace, and Coan, "Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem"; Guhl, Ebner, and Rau, *The Online Ecosystem of the German Far-Right*.

44 Elena Pavan and Manuela Caiani, "'Not in My Europe': Extreme Right Online Networks and Their Contestation of EU Legitimacy," in *Euroscepticism, Democracy and the Media*, eds. Manuela Caiani and Simona Guerra (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 169–93.

45 Annett Heft et al., "Toward a Transnational Information Ecology on the Right? Hyperlink Networking among Right-Wing Digital News Sites in Europe and the United States," *International Journal of Press/Politics* 26, no. 2 (2020): 484–504, https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220963670.

46 Froio and Ganesh, "The Transnationalisation of Far Right Discourse on Twitter."

47 Ibid., 531.

interconnections between these types of online spaces and platforms and focusing on a single type of online space is illustrative of Baele, Brace, and Coan's concern that research in the area is at risk of "developing in a scattered, incomplete and non-cumulative way."[48] In lieu of fragmented research on singular online entities, therefore, this report explores the development of a more cohesive picture of Europe's far-right online ecosystem via a triple-layered ecological approach, including a comparative element, that specifically focuses on outlinking activity and content. Using Twitter as an initial sampling point has the added benefit of enabling us to explore the "gateway" effect of popular social media sites in understanding ecosystem disconnects and overlaps: the importance and/or prevalence of outlinking as a means of directing users to platforms and content, including potentially REMVE or other violent extremist content, they might not otherwise utilize or see on mainstream social media sites.

METHODOLOGY

Ethics

Data collection and management was conducted in accordance with the relevant research ethics policies of all institutions involved in the project. For additional security and privacy protection, collected data was not shared outside of the project team and no Twitter accounts are identified in this report, except for the official accounts of AfD and RN, nor are any tweets quoted.

Data Collection and Parsing

Data collection took place from January 11, 2021, to February 4, 2021, and comprised four stages. In the first stage, two separate subsets of Twitter users were created, one for AfD and one for RN. Included were all followers of each party's official Twitter account that had tweeted in the previous 15 days. This yielded a total of 27,418 users for @AfD (est. September 2012) and 39,797 users for @RNational_off (est. September 2009).

Stage two involved filtering these lists of followers via purposive sampling to obtain two lists of followers displaying explicitly far-right inclinations.[49] This was achieved by using Python to identify followers whose biographical information contained one or more keywords related to AfD or RN.[50] An additional filter was then employed so that only accounts with fewer than 1,000 followers or an influence score (potential

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48   Baele, Brace, and Coan, "Uncovering the Far-Right Online Ecosystem," 2.

49   Algorithmic filtering for bots was not implemented, as the accounts were manually vetted by the research team.

50   The lists of keywords were created based on background reading and also iteratively by reviewing the biographies of users displaying explicitly far-right inclinations. For AfD, the keywords were: AfD, Pegida, patriot, meuthen, gauland, nationalist, right, junge, alternative, abascal, conscription, Wehrpflicht, anti-islam, gab.ai, trump, le pen, conservative, volk, RNational. For RN, the keywords were: Nazi, Marine, LePen, AfD, Pegida, patriot, steeve, briois, bardella, Rassemblement, Rally, Génération, souverainism, protection, nationalist, Generation Identity, alternative, immigration, pojadism, occident, anti-islam, gab.ai, RNational.

level of influence among their followers based on an established set of metrics)[51] of greater than 5,000 were included. Employing these criteria meant that a more coherent (lower profile) list of followers was obtained, while also ensuring that influential accounts within the network were also included (but excluding journalists, researchers, etc.).

The research team then manually inspected the biographies and recent tweets of all remaining accounts (1,645 for AfD and 1,960 for RN), with a researcher fluent in French and German translating as necessary. Any accounts that were not explicitly far-right in their orientation, per the conceptualization outlined earlier, were removed from the dataset. As part of an iterative process, the researchers reviewed the coding of a sample of accounts and resolved differences through discussion. At the end of this stage, the lists of followers had been reduced to 1,137 for AfD and 1,501 for RN.

The third stage was to collect tweets from each of the relevant user accounts. The most recent tweets of each user were collected, up to a maximum of 200 for each account, in accordance with Twitter's default Application Programming Interface (API) result and to ensure expediency. Collecting the most recent 200 tweets is also preferable to collecting tweets from a specific time frame because the approach captures comparable data for users who post frequently as well as those who post infrequently.[52] The tweets were collected on February 2-4, 2021, first for RN, then AfD.

For the purposes of this report, outlinks refer to non-Twitter URLs that take users who click on them off the Twitter platform to other online spaces. The fourth and final stage of the data collection process entailed parsing all outlinks appearing within the data. First, all outlinks were automatically extracted from the collected data and saved in a database for the purposes of our second and third layers of analysis. Then all top-level domain information was extracted from the outlinks to inform the top layer of our analysis (discussed below).[53] For example, all links to RT content (e.g., https://www.rt.com/news/511152-yemen-aden-airport-attack-icrc/) were recorded as 'RT.com.' In addition, certain domains were aggregated, where appropriate, into a single category. For example, not just 'www.rt.com,' but also 'www.de.rt.com' and 'www.francais.rt.com" were all categorized as "rt.com."

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51   Influence was measured using established metrics detailed in the paper cited here. Because follower information was not collected, relevant metrics were omitted from the influence calculation. J. M. Berger and Bill Strathearn, *Who Matters Online: Measuring Influence, Evaluating Content and Countering Violent Extremism in Online Social Networks* (London: ICSR, 2013), https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ICSR-Report-Who-Matters-Online-Measuring-influence-Evaluating-Content-and-Countering-Violent-Extremism-in-Online-Social-Networks.pdf.

52   For additional examples of research employing a similar methodology, see: J.M. Berger. *The Alt-right Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Audience for Alt-right Content on Twitter* (Dublin: VOX-Pol, 2018), https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/AltRightTwitterCensus.pdf.

53   It was rare for a tweet to contain multiple URLs, but in the case that multiple URLs were included, only the first URL was extracted, consistent with the data format provided by the Twitter API.

Caveats

This data was gathered not only between one and three weeks following the January 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol[54] but also during a hate trial against French politician and leader of RN, Marine Le Pen, which she subsequently won.[55] The data was also gathered following the conclusion of German authorities' investigation into AfD for activities including violating the German constitution and threatening Germany's democratic political system and at a time when the BfV had not yet, but was largely expected to announce their decision to put the party under government surveillance.[56] While the authors did not uncover any evidence to suggest the events occurring prior to data collection raised any methodological concerns, they are worth noting here.

It should also be noted that there were a small number of accounts that had either been suspended or deleted (53 for AfD and 46 for RN) in the period between stages one and three of data collection. As a result, it was not possible to collect tweets from these accounts and, thus, these users were removed from the dataset. It is unclear how and why these accounts were removed or deleted, whether because of account holders' own decisions or violation of Twitter's terms of service. Following their deletion, 1,084 user accounts remained in the AfD dataset and 1,455 users in the RN dataset.

Overview of the Data

Our final research dataset (see Table 1) comprised 2,466 accounts, composed of 1,084 AfD follower accounts and 1,455 RN follower accounts. A total of 440,392 tweets were collected, with approximately 44% of these posted or re-tweeted by the AfD followers and 60% by the RN followers. To be clear, the increased activity of RN followers as compared to AfD followers suggested by these percentages reflects the greater number of RN accounts appearing in the dataset and is not necessarily indicative of a more active RN follower presence. The number of tweets per user account was actually very similar for AfD and RN follower accounts (see Table 1 on the next page).

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54   For RN and other far-right parties' reaction to the January 6 attacks, see: "How was the Capitol Insurrection Viewed by Far-Right Extremists Globally?" *The Soufan Center,* February 8, 2021, https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-february-8/.

55   "France's Far-Right Leader Marine Le Pen Acquitted of Hate Speech Charges," *France24,* May 4, 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20210504-france-s-far-right-leader-marine-le-pen-acquitted-of-hate-speech-charges.

56   "Germany Expected To Put Right-Wing AfD Under Surveillance For Violating Constitution," *NPR,* January 22, 2021, https://www.npr.org/transcripts/959264440.

Table 1. Overview of the Data*

	AfD	RN	Combined
No. of accounts	1,084	1,455	2,466
No. of tweets	192,162	262,417	440,392
No. of tweets containing an outlink	14,637	14,970	28,415
No. of distinct links	11,714	11,363	21,973

Since there were some users common to both datasets, the figure for the "Combined" column is less than the sum of the "AfD" and "RN" columns.

Outlinks appeared in 28,415 or 6.45% of the collected tweets. Some 77.32% of those outlinks were unique (i.e., appearing only once in the dataset). This indicates that outlinking was relatively widespread amongst the pro-far-right Twitter followers of AfD and RN, with roughly one in every sixteen tweets directing users to linked content outside of Twitter.

In addition, there was relatively little overlap between the confirmed far-right Twitter followers of AfD and RN within the dataset, with just 73 or 2.96% of accounts following both AfD and RN's official Twitter accounts. This is further illustrated by Figure 1, which shows retweets within and between the two networks and is in keeping with the work of Froio and Ganesh that determined that the Twitter activity of followers of European far-right political parties fit largely within national boundaries.[57] As it pertains to supporters of AfD and RN, specifically, this appears to conform with previous research and reporting on the relative separation between the two political parties, both of which promote Euroskeptic agendas and highly nationalistic (and, therefore, nation-first) rhetoric and policy, but differ on other key policy decisions and in terms of their voter demographics.[58] Such separation follows similar trends amongst far-right parties throughout Europe, even despite efforts to foster greater cooperation amongst them,[59] and calls into question whether these two online ecosystems can, in and of themselves, be considered interdependent or necessarily interconnected.

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57   Froio and Ganesh, "The Transnationalisaton of Far Right Discourse."

58   Maïa De la Baume, "French, German Euroskeptics Plot Alliance," *Politico,* January 25, 2019, https://www.politico.eu/article/french-german-euroskeptics-plot-alliance-afd-national-rally-nicolas-bay-joerg-meuthen/; Richard McMahon, "Is Alt-Europe Possible? Populist Radical Right Counternarratives of European Integration," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 30, no. 1 (2022): 10-25, https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1919865.

59   Lili Bayer, Maïa De la Baume, and Hannah Roberts, "European Far-Right Leaders Fail to Tie the Knot," *Politico,* December 4, 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-marine-le-pen-jaroslaw-kaczynski-europe-far-right-parties-coalition/.
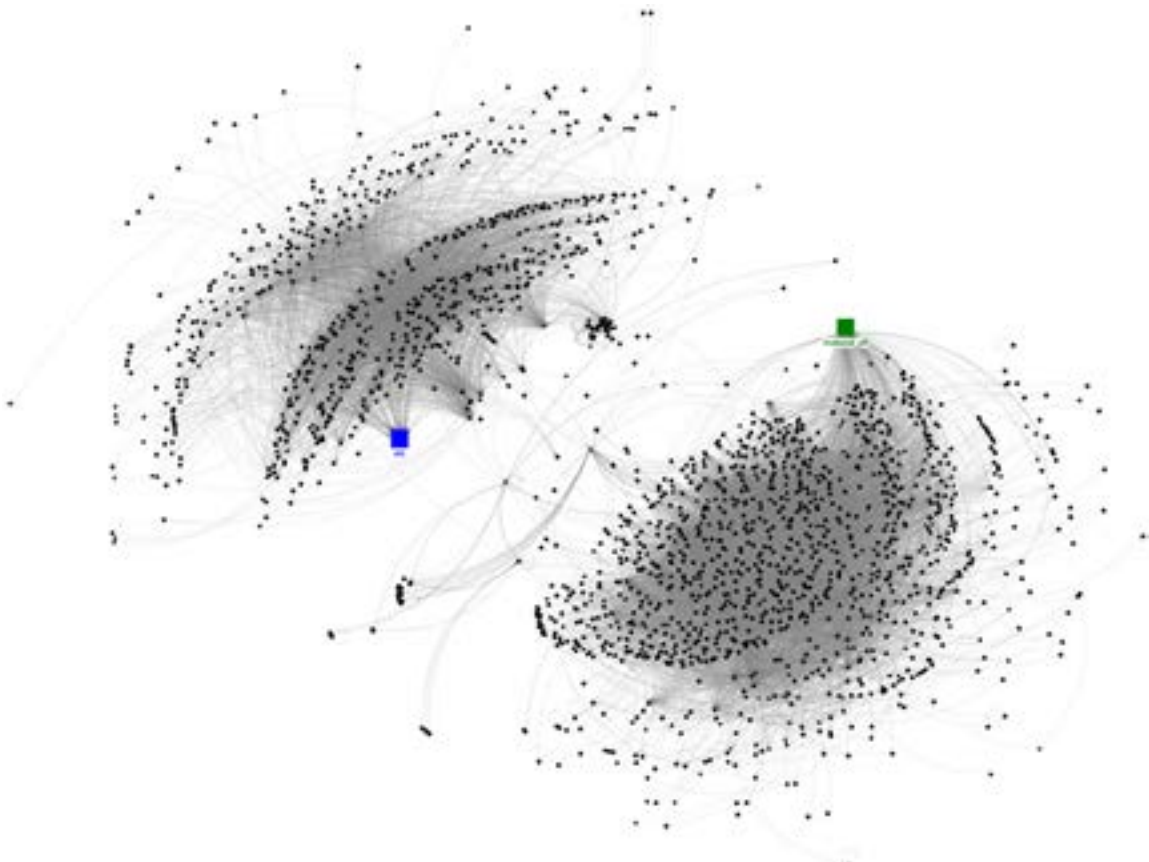
FINDINGS

As noted earlier, the data compiled was subjected to three layers of analysis:

- Exploring the types of online spaces linked to by the two parties' confirmed far-right Twitter followers;

- Analyzing the types of content they outlinked to, including attention to the presence or absence of REMVE content;

- Identifying the similarities and differences between the two parties' explicitly far-right Twitter followers with regards to the types of online spaces trafficked by them, the characteristics of these online entities, and the nature of the content they most heavily outlinked to.

As such, this section is divided into three sub-sections each corresponding to one of the three layers. The largest and most detailed sub-section is the first, which explores our sample of pro-far-right AfD and RN Twitter followers' most outlinked to top-level domains. It addresses both the service types represented in the lists of top 30 domains and, where appropriate, also addresses the domains' ideological types. Sub-section two provides analysis of the technical specifications of the types of content that were out-linked to, while the final sub-section considers the ideological thrust of the content, identified through investigating the nature of the content behind the most tweeted off-platform URLs.

Figure 1. Retweets within and between the AfD and RN Twitter networks (n = 1,943)

Types of Outlinked Entities

A striking feature of the dataset is the sheer volume of online entities that were outlinked to by the pro-far-right Twitter followers of AfD and RN. The total number of discrete top-level domains identified across both follower networks was over 1,500. Despite this, each follower network's top outlinks were dominated by a relatively small number of platforms, with each displaying a long "tail" of top-level domains (i.e., a large number of social media platforms, websites, and other types of online entities that were only outlinked to once or twice). Both AfD and RN's followers' top three most outlinked top-level domains appear in less than 30% of the outlinks in the dataset.[60] In fact, for both groups the top 30 hostnames only appear in roughly 55% of the outlinks in the dataset.[61] The fact that the 30th ranked top-level domain for each group was found in only 63 (tagesspiegel.de) and 54 (vk.com) outlinks respectively indicates how considerable the dispersal of the remaining links was.[62] Put another way, each follower network's long tail of outlinks actually contains far fewer outlinks compared to the top 30 listings, but represent a much greater number of the discrete online entities outlinked to.

The remainder of this section focuses on AfD and RN's explicitly far-right follower networks' top 30 most outlinked to top-level domains (see Tables 2 and 3), as this covers a minimum of 52% of all out-links distributed by each. These top 30 most outlinked to entities were manually categorized for each follower network according to their service type and, if relevant, sub-type. The 11 entity types identified were:

- Website (e.g., news sites);
- Social Media Marketing/Posting/Sharing;
- Social Networking;
- Follower Tracking;
- URL Shortening;
- Video Sharing;
- Instant Messaging;
- Internet Archiving;
- Online Petitioning;
- Personal Blog;
- Video Streaming.

Per Table 4, websites dominated in terms of the service type most outlinked to by AfD and RN's confirmed far-right Twitter followers in our dataset(s), but with a wide diversity of other types of services also represented. Each of the service types outlinked to is discussed in more detail below, in their order of importance on the basis of discrete links. Also addressed is the somewhat anomalous follower tracking.

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60   For AfD, the top three hostnames appear in 27.86% (by number of posts) and 26.64% (by number of distinct links). For RN, the figures are 23.75% and 23.97%, respectively.

61   For AfD, the top 30 hostnames appear in 55.64% (by number of posts) and 52.78% (by number of distinct links). For RN, the figures are 54.18% and 51.65%, respectively.

62   For AfD, there were 5,531 distinct links whose top-level domain name did not appear in the top 30 list. For RN, the total was 5,494.

Table 2. Top 30 Hostnames in the AfD Far-right Dataset, by Number of Posts and Number of Distinct Links

	By number of tweets		By number of distinct links	
	Hostname	**Total**	**Hostname**	**Total**
1	youtube.com	2,622	youtube.com	2,259
2	fllwrs.com	937	facebook.com	435
3	bild.de	519	bild.de	427
4	facebook.com	471	journalistenwatch.com	306
5	journalistenwatch.com	434	welt.de	279
6	welt.de	358	afd.de	206
7	afd.de	277	focus.de	171
8	focus.de	206	dlvr.it	144
9	dlvr.it	145	instagram.com	140
10	tichyseinblick.de	144	rt.com	119
11	instagram.com	141	epochtimes.de	117
12	jungefreiheit.de	138	n-tv.de	107
13	rt.com	137	jungefreiheit.de	105
14	t.me	134	tichyseinblick.de	102
15	epochtimes.de	133	breitbart.com	102
16	wochenblick.at	124	t.me	100
17	n-tv.de	112	bitchute.com	92
18	breitbart.com	110	faz.net	88
19	bitchute.com	101	va.newsrepublic.net	83
20	faz.net	99	web.archive.org	82
21	va.newsrepublic.net	86	compact-online.de	80
22	spiegel.de	86	wochenblick.at	79
23	compact-online.de	85	bz-berlin.de	77
24	bz-berlin.de	85	spiegel.de	74
25	web.archive.org	82	bit.ly	74
26	bit.ly	80	wz.de	74
27	philosophia-perennis.com	78	buff.ly	67
28	buff.ly	74	voiceofeurope.com	66
29	wz.de	74	trib.al	65
30	tagesspiegel.de	72	tagesspiegel.de	63
	Total	**8,144**	**Total**	**6,183**

Table 3. Top 30 Hostnames in the RN Far-right Dataset, by Number of Posts and Number of Distinct Links

	By number of tweets		By number of distinct links	
	Hostname	**Total**	**Hostname**	**Total**
1	youtube.com	2,138	youtube.com	1,859
2	valeursactuelles.com	840	facebook.com	452
3	fdesouche.com	578	valeursactuelles.com	413
4	facebook.com	563	fdesouche.com	296
5	lefigaro.fr	438	lefigaro.fr	285
6	bit.ly	284	bit.ly	271
7	unfollow.fr	250	bvoltaire.fr	181
8	bvoltaire.fr	234	dlvr.it	159
9	ripostelaique.com	208	rt.com	147
10	unfollowspy.com	204	leparisien.fr	145
11	fllwrs.com	174	instagram.com	145
12	leparisien.fr	173	bfmtv.com	143
13	bfmtv.com	171	ripostelaique.com	130
14	dlvr.it	163	zpr.io	113
15	rt.com	161	shar.es	108
16	cnews.fr	151	resistancerepublicaine.com	99
17	instagram.com	151	cnews.fr	98
18	shar.es	121	wz.de	74
19	zpr.io	119	lepoint.fr	71
20	resistancerepublicaine.com	115	marianne.net	71
21	mesopinions.com	104	dreuz.info	70
22	damocles.co	93	sputniknews.com	65
23	lepoint.fr	90	pscp.tv	63
24	t.me	89	20minutes.fr	62
25	marianne.net	88	bitchute.com	61
26	dreuz.info	88	t.me	61
27	sputniknews.com	81	lemonde.fr	59
28	policeetrealites.com	81	mesopinions.com	58
29	pscp.tv	80	francebleu.fr	56
30	francesoir.fr	80	vk.com	54
	Total	**8,110**	**Total**	**5,869**

Table 4. Types of Service by Number of Top-level Domains Outlinked To, Number of Tweets Containing Links, and Number of Discrete Links

Type of service	AfD			RN			Total		
	Top-level domains outlinked to	Tweets containing links	Discrete links	Top-level domains outlinked to	Tweets containing links	Discrete links	Top-level domains outlinked to	Tweets containing links	Discrete links
Websites	20	3,346	2,725	21	3,958	2,589	39	7,304	5,314
Video sharing	2	2,723	2,351	2	2,202	1,920	2	4,925	4,271
Follower tracking	1	937	1	3	623	4	3	1,560	5
Social networking	2	612	575	3	771	651	3	1,383	1,226
URL shortening	2	151	139	2	403	384	3	554	523
Social media marketing/ posting/ sharing	2	219	211	2	284	267	3	503	478
Instant messaging	1	134	100	1	89	61	1	223	161
Online petitioning	-	-	-	1	104	58	1	104	58
Internet archiving	1	82	82	-	-	-	1	82	82
Video streaming	-	-	-	1	80	63	1	80	63
Personal blog	1	78	50	-	-	-	1	78	50
Total	**32**	**8,282**	**6,234**	**36**	**8,514**	**5,997**	**58**	**16,796**	**12,231**

Worth mentioning here, too, is the ratio of tweets-to-links—or how many times each distinct link, as defined above, appeared in a tweet—for each type of identified service. The overall ratio of tweets-to-

links in Table 5 is relatively low, with each distinct link appearing on average in 1.37 posts. While this finding is subject to the important methodological caveat that it is based on only the (up to) last 200 tweets of the 2,466 user accounts in our overall dataset, the limited (re)tweeting of each link within these networks is still surprising given the homogeneity of these users. The tweets-to-links ratio is discussed below in more detail for some of the services.

Table 5. Ratio of Tweets : Links by Type of Service

Type of Service	AfD	RN	Overall
Websites	1.23	1.53	1.37
State-owned news site	*1.15*	*1.14*	*1.15*
Far-right news site	*1.27*	*1.76*	*1.57*
Political party-associated news site	*1.31*	*-*	*1.31*
Other news site	*1.20*	*1.31*	*1.25*
Far-right political party site	*1.34*	*-*	*1.34*
Other website	*1.04*	*1.76*	*1.55*
Video sharing	1.16	1.15	1.15
Follower tracking	937	157	313
Social networking	1.06	1.18	1.13
URL shortening	1.09	1.05	1.06
Social media marketing/posting/sharing	1.04	1.06	1.05
Instant messaging	1.34	1.46	1.39
Online petitioning	-	1.79	1.79
Internet archiving	1	-	1
Video streaming	-	1.27	1.27
Personal blog	1.56	-	1.56
Total	1.33	1.42	1.37

Websites

Given the high level of outlinking to websites by both AfD and RN Twitter follower networks, which accounted for approximately 42% of all tweeted outlinks, this category was disaggregated further and found to be comprised largely of outlinks to news sites (see Table 6).

Website Outlinks: Far-right AfD followers

The top 30 lists for AfD contain a total of 32 different top-level domains,[63] of which 20 are websites. Eighteen of these websites were news sites. One of these was Russian state-owned (rt.com), two were associated with a political party (compact-online.de, wochenblick.at), and five were far-right news sites (journalistenwatch.com, jungefreiheit.de, epochtimes.de, breitbart.com, voiceofeurope.com[64]). Of the remaining ten news sites, the most prevalent were bild.de (a German tabloid newspaper), welt.de (a German television news channel), and focus.de (a German news magazine).[65] The other two websites were AfD's own site, afd.de, and va.newsrepublic.net.

Although va.newsrepublic.net purports to be a news site, two points should be noted. First, Google's link safety analysis flags the URL as unsafe and a Google search for the URL produces hits related to clickbait, disinformation, and malware. Second, searching the URL on Twitter produces a lot of apparent bot-related activity. An examination of our dataset from the end of stage one of the data collection revealed that a total of 129 of the 27,418 AfD followers had tweeted a link to va.newsrepublic.net. On average, these user accounts tweeted 28.9 times per day, compared to 10.8 times for the overall dataset, which is suggestive of astroturf (i.e., fake grassroots) activity.[66] Within the final AfD dataset, there were 86 tweets containing the va.newsrepublic.net hostname. Seventy-one of these were posted by one user account. This user self-identified as a digital patriot ("*digitale Patrioten*"), with a banner photo that included an AfD logo and a biography that signposted users to Telegram, VK, Gab, DLive, and BitChute. The account shows signs of automated activity. It is 11 years old, during which time it has posted more than 125,000 tweets (over 900 tweets per month). It posts outlinks to a wide variety of platforms, from YouTube and mainstream news sites to disinformation sites and personal blogs.

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63   fllwrs.com and philosophia-perennis.com only appear in the top 30 by number of posts; voiceofeurope.com and trib.al only appear in the top 30 by number of distinct links.

64   Voice of Europe ceased publishing in June 2020 due to what it described as "increased censorship" by major social media platforms that, among other things, affected its ability to monetize its content; for more, see: John Cody, "Voice of Europe Closes Down Following Big Tech Censorship and Ad Service Ban," *REMIX,* June 26, 2020, https://rmx.news/article/voice-of-europe-closes-down-following-big-tech-censorship-and-ad-service-ban/.

65   The other seven were: tichyseinblick.de, n-tv.de, faz.net, spiegel.de, bz-berlin.de, wz.de and tagesspiegel.de.

66   Astroturfing is the attempt to create an impression of widespread grassroots support for a policy, individual, or product, where little such support exists and the campaign is, in fact, orchestrated. For more, see: Crofton Black and Abigail Fielding-Smith, "Astroturfing, Twitter Bots, Amplification: Inside the Online Influence Industry," *NS Tech,* December 7, 2017, https://tech.newstatesman.com/feature/astroturfing-twitter-bots-amplification-inside-online-influence-industry.

Table 6. Types of Website by Number Outlinked To, Number of Tweets Containing Links, and Number of Discrete Links

Websites	AfD			RN			Total		
	Top-level domains out-linked to	Tweets contain-ing links	Discrete links	Top-level domains out-linked to	Tweets contain-ing links	Discrete links	Top-level domains out-linked to	Tweets contain-ing links	Discrete links
State-owned news site	1	137	119	2	242	212	2	379	331
Far-right news site	5	882	696	5	1,975	1,119	10	2,857	1,815
Political party-as-sociated news site	2	209	159	-	-	-	2	209	159
Other news site	10	1,755	1,462	10	1,399	1,064	19	3,154	2,526
Far-right political party site	1	277	206	-	-	-	1	277	206
Other website	1	86	83	4	342	194	5	428	277
Total	**20**	**3,346**	**2,725**	**21**	**3,958**	**2,589**	**39**	**7,304**	**5,314**

Website Outlinks: Far-right RN followers

The top 30 lists for RN contain a total of 36 different top-level domains[67] and, as with AfD, the most out-linked to entities were websites. RN's top 30 list also contains a total of 21 different websites, 17 of which were news sites. Two of these news sites also appeared in the top 30 lists for AfD. One of them, wz.de, is *Westdeutsche Zeitung*, a regional German newspaper in North Rhine-Westphalia. This appeared in the top 30 lists for both groups as a result of one user, common to both datasets, frequently posting links containing the wz.de hostname. All but two of the tweets containing this hostname were posted by this user. Aside from this anomaly, the only news site that appeared in the top 30 lists for both groups was

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67   unfollow.fr, unfollowspy.com, fllwrs.com, damocles.co, policeetrealites.com and francesoir.fr only appear in the top 30 by number of posts; wz.de, 20minutes.fr, bitchute.com, lemonde.fr, francebleu.fr and vk.com only appear in the top 30 by number of distinct links.

rt.com. *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), is a state-owned Russian news channel. There was a second state-owned Russian news site in the RN top 30 lists: *Sputnik News* (formerly known as *Voice of Russia*).

Five of the news sites in the RN top 30 lists were far-right. These included valeursactuelles.com and fde-souche.com, which were the second and third most common hostnames by number of posts (and third and fourth most common by number of distinct links).[68] The other three were bvoltaire.fr, ripostelaique.com, and resistancerepublicaine.com. Of the remaining news sites, the most prevalent were lefigaro.fr (a French daily newspaper), leparisien.fr (a French daily newspaper), and bfmtv.com (a French 24-hour news channel).[69]

Website Outlink: Tweets-to-links

Also noteworthy are the findings for the tweets-to-links ratio in the far-right news sites category (see Table 5). The number of posts outlinking to such content was significantly higher in the RN dataset (1,975 compared to 882 in the AfD dataset). The tweets-to-links ratio was also considerably higher: 1.76:1 for RN, compared to 1.27:1 for AfD. The ratio is higher still for the two most prevalent far-right news sites within the RN dataset. For valeursactuelles.com the ratio is 2.03:1 (840 posts containing 413 distinct links) and for fdesouche.com it is 1.95:1 (578 posts containing 296 distinct links). Together, these findings suggest a greater (re)sharing of explicitly far-right content within the RN network as a general trend based on the collected data.

Within the RN dataset, the other websites category also had a ratio of 1.76:1 (194 links in 342 posts). The four websites in this category were policeetrealites.com (a review of French news concerning law enforcement and the security services), two sites regarded as "identitarian far-right" (damocles.co and dreuz.info),[70] and another (francesoir.fr) associated with spreading conspiracy theories.[71] The last of these, *France-Soir*, had been a daily newspaper until, in 2019, the *France-Soir* President dismissed all the journalists and began using the site to publish personal opinions.[72] Damocles.co had a particularly high ratio of 3.1 posts for every link (93 posts; 30 links).

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68   The other three were: bvoltaire.fr, ripostelaique.com and resistancerepublicaine.com.

69   The other seven were: cnews.fr, lepoint.fr, marianne.net, wz.de, 20minutes.fr, lemonde.fr and francebleu.fr.

70   Cointet, et al., describe these two websites as "identitarian far-right," which "combines the most traditionalist components of the French extreme right with the most radical ethno-racial identity fringe," noting that websites under that rubric are "characterized by their hostility to sub-Saharan and Muslim immigrant populations." For more, see: Jean-Philippe Cointet et al., "Uncovering the Structure of the French Media Ecosystem," *IC2S2*, July 2021, https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-03299024/document.

71   Clothilde Goujard, "Brussels, Paris Split with Press Publishers Over Exemptions in Online Content Rules," *Politico,* October 20, 2021, https://www.politico.eu/article/digital-services-act-europe-france-press-publishers-exemptions-online-content-rules/; Tom Wheeldon, "Martine Wonner, the Pro-Macron MP Turned French Covid Conspiracy 'Figurehead,'" *France24,* August 7, 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210807-martine-wonner-the-pro-macron-mp-turned-french-covid-conspiracy-figurehead.

72   Aude Dassonville and William Audureau, "France-Soir, le Nouveau Repaire des Covid-sceptiques," *Le Monde,* September 10, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2020/11/17/francesoir-le-nouveau-repaire-des-covid-sceptiques_6060038_823448.html.

Video Sharing

After websites, the second most outlinked to service type by both AfD and RN's explicitly far-right Twitter followers was video sharing, a category dominated by Google-owned YouTube.

Video Sharing: Far-right AfD followers

As Table 2 shows, by far the most common top-level domain appearing in the AfD dataset was youtube.com, which appeared in outlinks contained in 2,622 (17.91%) of the 14,637 overall (re)tweets posted by our sample of confirmed far-right AfD followers. There was a total of 2,259 distinct links containing the youtube.com hostname, which accounted for 19.28% of the 11,714 distinct links in the dataset. Another video sharing platform, bitchute.com—which has gained notoriety for hosting far-right content[73]—also appears in the top 30 list, with 92 distinct links found in a total of 101 tweets.

Video Sharing: Far-right RN followers

Youtube.com was also the most common hostname in the RN dataset. It was found in outlinks contained in 2,138 (14.28%) of the 14,970 tweets. There was a total of 1,859 distinct links containing the youtube.com hostname, which accounted for 16.36% of the 11,363 distinct links in the dataset. Bitchute.com also appears, although less prominently than in the AfD dataset. The bitchute.com hostname appeared in a total of 61 distinct links, placing it 25th by this count, and in a total of 64 tweets, meaning that it sat outside the top 30 hostnames by number of posts.

Social Networking

The third most highly outlinked to service type by both follower networks was social networking. Two of these, Facebook and Facebook-owned image-sharing site Instagram, appear prominently on both AfD and RN's top 30 lists. Facebook was the second most outlinked to top-level domain by distinct links on both lists, while Instagram placed ninth on the AfD list and a slightly lower eleventh on the RN list. Together, these Facebook-owned platforms appear in approximately 8% of all tweets containing outlinks across both follower networks. The only other social networking site in the top 30 listings is the already-mentioned Russian-owned VK, which does not feature in the AfD listing but sneaks in at number 30 in RN's list of distinct links.

URL Shortening

Once outside of the top three most outlinked top-level domains, the numbers of outlinks to other service types drops precipitously. URL shortening services are the fourth most prevalent type of outlink in the overall dataset, but only 523 of these distinct links are present compared to 1,226 for social networking,

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73   Milo Trujillo, Maurício Gruppi, Cody Buntain, and Benjamin D. Horne, "What is BitChute? Characterizing the 'Free Speech' Alternative to YouTube," *ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media,* 2020, https://arxiv.org/pdf/2004.01984.pdf.

the third highest outlinked to service type. It should be noted that, as well as shortening URLs, some URL shortener services also provide enhanced metadata about users who click on the link.

On examination, the URL shorteners bit.ly, trib.al, and zpr.io outlinked to a variety of content types, much of it far-right in nature. As well as numerous news sites, the bit.ly outlinks led to everything from the official websites of the UK Royal Family and the Russian Kremlin to sites selling discounted mobile phones and AirPods and the membership page of the U.S. National Rifle Association and the anti-Islam group Act for America. There were also 22 bit.ly links in the RN dataset that led to content from *Valeurs Actuelles*. All but one of these were retweets from the official *Valeur Actuelles* Twitter account; the other was a link to an article posted by the article's author.[74] Of the 65 trib.al links, 35 (53.85%) led to articles in the *New York Post*. Of the remaining 30, eight led to content at breitbart.com and six led to the UK's *Daily Mail*. The vast majority of the zpr.io links led to YouTube videos, although a number of these were no longer available on the site when we sought to access them.[75]

Social Media Marketing/Posting/Sharing

There was one social media marketing/posting/sharing service that appeared in the top 30 lists for both AfD and RN: dlvr.it. Of the 159 distinct links in the RN dataset that contained the hostname dlvr.it, 106 led to items in the far-right magazine *L'Incorrect*. AfD follower outlinks also included dlvr.it links. In addition, there were 108 distinct links in the RN dataset that used the hostname shar.es. All of these far-right RN follower outlinks to share.es led to items in the far-right magazine *Valeurs Actuelles*, indicating that the dissemination of links to this publication via Twitter was even greater than Table 3 suggested. Links to shar.es were not within the top 30 list for AfD far-right followers, however. Meanwhile, in the AfD dataset, there were 74 tweets that used the buff.ly service. Thirty-one of these far-right AfD follower outlinks to buff.ly led to items on the satirical news site *The Babylon Bee*. Interestingly, buff.ly did not appear within the top 30 links of RN far-right followers. Thus, while delvr.it seemed to be commonly utilized among both RN and AfD far-right followers, RN and AfD followers appeared distinct in their utilization of shar.es and buff.ly respectively, which may indicate differentiation amongst popular sites in each country or, importantly, amongst each subset of far-right users and the extent of their respective online ecosystems more broadly.

Instant Messaging

The messaging service Telegram (t.me), which has received considerable scrutiny for hosting violent extremist and terrorist content (both jihadist and right-wing), is the only instant messaging service appearing in the top 30 listings. It is included in the top 30 for both follower networks, with more outlinks to it posted by the pro-far-right followers of AfD than those of RN.

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74   The AfD dataset contained two bit.ly links that led to content at jungefreiheit.de, one that led to content at breitbart.com, and one that led to content at valeursactuelles.com.

75   Of the 119 posts containing zpr.io links, 94 (79.00%) led to YouTube.

ONLINE PETITIONING

Online petitioning only appeared as a service type in the top 30 list for far-right RN followers. Aside from follower tracking—discussed further below—online petitioning represented the type of service with the highest ratio of tweets-to-links among far-right RN followers (see Table 5). A total of 104 posts, which contained 58 distinct links to petitions, all hosted at mesopinions.com (a ratio of 1.79:1) appeared in the dataset. These petitions spanned a variety of subjects, including animal welfare (e.g., the regulation of animal sanctuaries, the criminalization of animal cruelty, and year-round outdoor poultry farming), the criminal justice system (e.g., legal reforms aimed at tackling domestic violence, increasing the statute of limitations for sexual offences against minors, and the removal of judicial immunity), and the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., ending the requirement to wear masks outside; opposing COVID passports; and a call to listen to Professor Raoult, a French professor who promoted the use of the anti-malaria drug hydroxy-chloroquine to treat COVID-19).[76] Other petitions included calls for the resignation of French President Macron, for allowing French citizens to carry a weapon, and for the dissolution of the Black African Defense League, a group supporting anti-racism and Pan-Africanism that has since been dissolved in France.[77] The most shared petition, however, called for support for the far-right group Generation Identity, following the conviction and imprisonment of three of the group's members for impersonating border officials during an attempt to stop immigrants crossing into France via the Alps.[78]

INTERNET ARCHIVING

While there were 82 links containing the hostname web.archive.org in the AfD dataset, this hostname was found in only one link in the RN dataset (a news item claiming that George Soros sent 1.7 million USD to Antifa). Within the AfD dataset, the outlinks containing web.archive.org led predominantly to news articles. For example, 16 of the links led to articles in *Die Welt*, whilst 12 others led to articles in *Bild*. These news articles covered a range of topics, from reports that Hezbollah was storing hundreds of kilograms of ammonium nitrate in southern Germany, to a survey finding that one-in-five Europeans is concerned about immigration, to reports of a group of "Turkish or Arab-looking men" attacking a snack bar, to the arrest of an Iranian man for throwing a stone slab at a synagogue.

VIDEO STREAMING

The only live streaming service to appear on the top 30 lists was the Twitter-owned and now discontinued Periscope (pscp.tv), which featured at number 23 on the RN list, with 63 distinct links. However, analysis of the overall dataset's top 20 most commonly tweeted outlinks (see Table 8) showed that, once

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76   "French Professor Faces Disciplinary Case Over Hydroxychloroquine Claims," *The Guardian,* November 12, 2020, https://www.theguard-ian.com/world/2020/nov/12/covid-professor-didier-raoult-hydroxychloroquine.

77   "Le Gouvernement Annonce la Dissolution de la Ligue de Défense Noire Africaine," *Le Monde,* September 29, 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2021/09/29/le-gouvernement-annonce-la-dissolution-de-la-ligue-de-defense-noire-africaine_6096474_823448.html.

78   Kim Willsher, "French Court Jails Far-Right Activists Over Anti-Immigrant Alps Stunt," *The Guardian,* August 29, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/29/french-court-jails-far-right-activists-over-anti-migrant-alps-stunt. In March 2021, after data collection, France officially banned Generation Identity. See: "France bans far-right group Generation Identity," *DW,* March 3, 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/france-bans-far-right-group-generation-identity/a-56760300.

follower tracking outlinks were removed, the joint first and joint third most tweeted outlinks in the dataset overall were to twitch.tv, which describes itself as "the world's leading live streaming platform for gamers."[79] The Twitch content is discussed further below.

Personal Blog

No personal blogs appeared in the top 30 list for RN far-right followers and only one personal blog appeared in the top 30 list for AfD far-right followers. Describing itself as "a look at the world with eyes sharpened by perennial philosophy," the blog is authored by David Berger. Formerly a professor at the Vatican and a gay activist, in 2010 Berger wrote the autobiographical *Der heilige Schein: Als schwuler Theologe in der katholischen Kirche* (*The Holy Sham: A Gay Theologian in the Catholic Church*). Berger describes the blog as liberal-conservative and informed by his Catholic background and claims that on average it receives two million clicks per month. He also describes it as anti-totalitarianism, pro-American, and pro-Israel, asserting that Israel is a "role model for defending against aggressive Islam and, at the same time, upholding human rights and democracy."

A second personal blog (also from the AfD dataset) appeared in 20th position in the list of the 20 most tweeted outlinks (see Table 8). Written in November 2020, the day after an Islamic State-claimed gun attack in Vienna, the outlinked-to blogpost criticized attempts to distance Islam from the attack, arguing that Islamism is inextricably linked to Islam, and that the only possible response is tough and uncompromising action. Interestingly, this blog post was also found to be housed at the far-right news site journalistenwatch.com, behind a web.archive.org outlink.

Follower Tracking

Follower trackers are social media management tools that allow users—in this case Twitter users—to be notified of and get metrics on their new followers and recent unfollowers. They are widely used by online influencers, but also by "ordinary" users, to keep track of their followers. Three follower tracking services appear across the top 30 lists (i.e., fllwrs.com, unfollow.fr, unfollowspy.com). These same three services also account for the top three most tweeted links in the overall dataset (see Table 8). The highest ratio of tweets-to-links was also for this category (see Table 5). This may be explained by the automated posting of tweets promoting these services and therefore the relative inconsistency in numbers for follower tracking services as opposed to others reflected in Table 4, given that 1,560 tweets containing links to these services were found in the overall dataset. This figure, which reduces to just five discrete links, represents the automated repeated posting of the same five links to the services by the latter on their users' behalf. Worth pointing out here too is that follower tracking services' purposes may include not just monitoring but also manipulation of follower counts.[80] For example, the top two URLs in Table 8, fllwrs.com and unfollowspy.com, were also the most linked-to URLs in Berger's 2018 alt-right Twitter

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79 Devon Delfino, "'What is Twitch?': Here's What You Need to Know About the World's Leading Live-streaming Platform for Gamers," *Business Insider,* June 11, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/what-is-twitch?r=US&IR=T.

80 Fanyu Que, Krishnan Rajagopalan, and Tauhid Zaman, "Penetrating a Social Network: The Follow-back Problem," *arXiv,* 2018, https://arxiv.org/abs/1804.02608.

census, which he described as likely playing "a significant role in distorting the distribution of friends and followers."[81] Use of these services by far-right networks therefore warrants further examination.

Content Types that Posts Outlinked to: Technical aspects

The second layer of our analysis investigated the technical specifications of the types of content being outlinked to by our sample of pro-far-right AfD and RN Twitter followers. To do this we utilized a sample of outlinks from the overall dataset. The sample contained 3,018 (25.04%) of the 12,052 total distinct links that contained one of the 58 hostnames from the top 30 lists for AfD and RN. The results, shown in Table 7, draw our attention to four major issues. The first is the predominance of video content, discussed in more depth below. Given that the most common top-level domain found in the outlinks was youtube.com, it is unsurprising that the most common type of content was YouTube videos.[82] However, the pro-far-right followers of both AfD and RN also posted links that led to BitChute videos and videos that were embedded within news articles and Facebook and Instagram posts. Twenty-five of the links in the RN dataset also led to other types of video content, including Periscope videos (n=16). In total, 805 (51.90%) of the AfD links and 752 (51.26%) of the RN links led to video content. The prominence of visuals is significant, given their accessibility (i.e., no high-level literacy skills necessary) and the ability of visual content to grab attention and produce a lasting persuasive and emotional response.[83]

The second issue is the prevalence of outlinking to website content versus, for example, posts on social networking platforms. For AfD, 48.36% of the links led to news articles or website posts compared to 7.48% that led to Facebook or Instagram posts. For RN, the equivalent figures were 48.74% compared to 8.86%. Third, there existed some limited signposting of users to Telegram channels. Given the relatively few outlinks to Telegram channels overall, it is worth noting that three of the fifteen Telegram channels outlinked to by RN users were also amongst the eighteen channels outlinked to by AfD users. Fourth, across both datasets there was a total of 149 (4.94%) links for which the content was no longer available.

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81   Berger, *The Alt-right Twitter Census,* 37.

82   Note that, as well as the youtube.com hostname, there were some links that used URL shorteners that also led to YouTube videos.

83   Dolf Zillmann, Silvia Knobloch, and Hong-sik Yu, "Effects of Photographs on the Selective Reading of News Reports," *Media Psychology* 3, no. 4 (2001): 301-324, https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532785xmep0304_01; Nicole Smith Dahmen and Daniel D. Morrison, "Place, Space, Time: Media gatekeeping and iconic imagery in the digital and social media age," *Digital Journalism* 4, no. 5 (2016): 658-678, https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2015.1081073; Georg Stenberg, "Conceptual and Perceptual Factors in the Picture Superiority Effect," *European Journal of Cognitive Psychology* 18, no. 6 (2006): 813-847, https://doi.org/10.1080/09541440500412361.

Table 7. Types of Content Behind the Outlinks (25% Sample of Top 30 Top-Level Domains)

AfD			RN		
Type of content	**No. of distinct links**	**%**	**Type of content**	**No. of distinct links**	**%**
YouTube video	569	36.69	YouTube video	480	32.72
News article	436	28.11	News article	464	31.63
News article with video	174	11.22	News article with video	175	11.93
Website postt	122	7.87	Unavailable content	80	5.45
Unavailable content	69	4.45	Website post	63	4.29
Facebook post	60	3.87	Facebook post	55	3.75
Instagram post	30	1.93	Facebook post with video	41	2.79
Facebook post with video	23	1.48	Other video content	25	1.70
Telegram channel	18	1.16	Instagram post	16	1.09
Website post with video	18	1.16	Telegram channel	15	1.02
BitChute video	18	1.16	Website post with video	13	0.89
Telegram post	7	0.45	Petition	13	0.89
PDF	4	0.26	Instagram post with video	9	0.61
Instagram post with video	3	0.19	VK post	9	0.61
			BitChute video	9	0.61
Total	**1,551**	**100%**	**Total**	**1,467**	**100%**

Content Types that Posts Outlinked to: Ideological aspects

The third and final layer of our analysis examined the ideological nature of the content outlinked to in the top 20 most tweeted links in the overall dataset. The results are shown in Table 8, which is notably dominated by outlinks posted by far-right RN Twitter followers; it was not possible to discern why this was the case from the dataset. The top 20 most tweeted links contained content falling into the following categories:

- Follower tracking services;
- Journalistic integrity;
- Video game streaming;
- Nationalism;
- Anti-Islam narratives;
- Anti-migration narratives;
- Child exploitation;

- COVID-19 restrictions and conspiracies;
- Support for far-right groups and parties.

As already mentioned, follower tracking services occupy the top three entry spots in Table 8, which warrants further research, but is not further discussed herein.

Follower tracking services aside, the joint top posts were a Facebook post in Italian calling for journalism that is not afraid to ask questions, which nonetheless appeared in just 37 tweets in the RN dataset, and a link to a German video gamer's live Twitch stream that again appeared just 37 times, this time in the AfD dataset. The next most outlinked to content, which appeared in 32 tweets in the RN dataset, was also a Twitch live stream, this time in English, by a self-described "proud nationalist."

Of the next 14 most tweeted links, a total of six outlinked to news articles. These articles covered such topics as a potential hijab and burqa ban in Switzerland; an organization that provides support to migrants; a study that found that a majority of Algerian students planned to settle in France following their studies; and a study that claimed that the lockdown was worsening the COVID-19 situation.

Although YouTube was the most outlinked to entity, only two of the top 20 most tweeted links in the dataset led to YouTube videos. The first of these was a video claiming to state the truth about the child sexual exploitation scandals in Telford and Rotherham in the UK. These and other similar events have contributed to a "Muslim grooming gangs" narrative, claiming "that a 'dis-proportionate' number of Asian/Muslim/Pakistani-heritage men are involved in grooming (mostly) white British girls for organised sexual abuse,"[84] which has been propagated by extremist groups such as Britain First.[85] The other was a video of the speech of anti-vaccine propagandist Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. in Berlin in August 2020, in which he promoted COVID-19 conspiracy theories and called for an end to restrictions.

Of the remaining six outlinks, one led to a Facebook post, two led to online petitions (one against the dissolution of Generation Identity, the other the previously mentioned petition calling for support for Generation Identity following the imprisonment of three of its members), one led to RN's official website for membership and donations, one led to a personal blog (written following the Vienna gun attack, as outlined previously), and the final link was inactive. Also worth mentioning here is the presence of not just German and French, but also Italian and English content in the list of most popular tweeted links.

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84 Ella Cockbain and Waqas Tufail, "Failing Victims, Fuelling Hate: Challenging the Harms of the 'Muslim Grooming Gangs' Narrative," *Race & Class* 61, no. 3 (2020): 3-32, https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396819895727.

85 Lella Nouri and Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, "Investigating Reclaim Australia and Britain First's Use of Social Media: Developing a New Model of Imagined Political Communities Online," *Journal for Deradicalization* no.18 (Spring 2019): 1-37, https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/183.

Table 8. Top 20 Tweeted Links in Overall Dataset

Rank	Hostname	Dataset	Description	Language	No. of posts
1	fllwrs.com	Both	Website of follower tracking service	English	1,111 (AfD: 937 RN: 174)
2	unfollowspy.com	Both	Website of follower tracking service	English	266 (RN: 199 AfD: 67)
3	unfollow.fr	RN	Website of follower tracking service	English	250
4	twitch.tv	AfD	Video gamer live stream	German	37
5	m.facebook.com	RN	Post calling for journalism that isn't afraid to ask questions	Italian	37
6	twitch.tv	RN	Live stream of a "proud nationalist"	English	32
7	swissinfo.ch	RN	News article: 'Switzerland moves toward hijab and burqa ban'	French	32
8	youtube.com	RN	Video claiming to state the truth about the grooming gangs of Telford and Rotherham, UK	French	29
9	valeursactuelles.com	RN	News article: 'A swimming pool in Nanterre has reserved slots for Muslim women for three years'	French	28
10	m.facebook.com	RN	Post criticising the former Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi	Italian	27
11	france-petitions.com	RN	Petition against the dissolution of Generation Identity	French	26
12	adhesions-rn.fr	RN	RN donations and membership	French	25
13	lefigaro.fr	RN	News article: 'Utopia 56, the pro-migrants association that challenges the state'	French	25
14	youtube.com	AfD	Robert F Kennedy Jr speech in Berlin in August 2020 (has since been removed by the uploader)	English	25
15	valeursactuelles.com	RN	News article about a study that claimed that lockdown was worsening the Covid-19 situation	French	24
16	mesopinions.com	RN	Petition calling for support for Generation Identity, following the conviction and imprisonment of three of the group's members	French	24
17	fdesouche.com	RN	News article about a police operation following the discovery of a decapitated body	French	23
18	fdesouche.com	RN	News article about a study that found that 57% of Algerian students in France plan to settle there after their studies	French	21
19	sumall.com	AfD	Content unavailable	Unknown	20
20	edtmeier.at	AfD	Personal blog attributing recent terrorist attacks to Islamization	German	16

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our overall dataset contained links from Twitter to well over 1,500 discrete other top-level domains. Most outlinks, however, resolved to just a handful of these, which is not anomalous; this type of power-law probability distribution has been found in other outlink analyses too.[86] The focus of the top-level domain analysis presented in this report was, therefore, on the top 30 most outlinked to such entities by the curated sample of confirmed far-right AfD and RN Twitter followers. The report addressed both the types of online services most outlinked to and, where discernible, their ideological type.

Based on the data presented above, and our initial research questions, a few key findings are of particular note for policymakers, researchers, and social media platforms. Chief among these findings, as discussed further below, the research did not uncover any REMVE or violent extremist support or content. As such, the discussion below emphasizes the importance of the development of effective policy and practice aimed at addressing REMVE, including, but not limited to, properly discerning the appropriate communities and online spaces of focus. In that vein, data gathered and analyzed in this report does not provide discernable evidence to suggest that the online ecosystems of far-right political party followers are (or are not) interconnected with REMVE online ecosystems or that there were any interactions between these two types of far-right actors. Appropriately, caveats to, factors that may have impacted, and avenues for future research to further test this finding are discussed in more detail below.

Question 1: Types of online spaces linked to—the prevalence of news and mainstream media

Our first question focused on the types of online spaces linked to by the two parties' confirmed far-right followers. A main finding from this analysis is that websites appeared to be a core component among outlinks shared by the defined far-right online networks. News websites were shown to be of particular importance, with both far-right news sites and mainstream media websites, including both press and television, playing prominent roles in far-right AfD and RN Twitter followers' outlinking behaviors. Put another way, lack of attention to traditional websites and their roles by researchers and policymakers interested in the contemporary far-right online scene would constitute a significant oversight. These findings regarding key roles for websites, news content, and video were backed up by our second and third layers of analysis. In terms of our second layer's focus on the technical specifications of outlinked to content, we found that video, news articles, and news articles with embedded video comprised 76% of the outlinked content. Our third analytical layer, focusing on the most tweeted links, again underlined the importance of news in the European far-right online ecosystem(s), with six of these links directing those who clicked them to news articles (of which four were on far-right news sites).

News articles, including factual items from mainstream media sources, have, in the past, consistently been used to portray far-right users themselves in an extremely positive light and their "enemies" in an

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86   Conway et al., "A Snapshot of the Syrian Jihadi Online Ecology," 9.

extremely negative light.[87] Put another way, far-right media content shared in online ecosystems can be produced and circulated, either intentionally or unintentionally, to fuel othering and/or conspiratorial rhetoric. It was not possible to understand if there was any strategic intent behind the sharing of news articles by the far-right AfD and RN Twitter followers we studied, but the likelihood is that the news content shared reflected their individual concerns and interests. Still, while not necessarily reflective of REMVE or violent extremist exploitation of the far-right online ecosystems studied here, it is important to note the prevalence of "othering" or conspiratorial news content shared and the potential impact that has on individual viewership.

The findings of this report also offer an insight into online ecosystems in general, and the variety of platforms and services they may encompass. The far-right Twitter followers of both AfD and RN outlinked to a diversity of online services and platforms. These included websites, video-sharing, follower tracking, and URL shortening services, in addition to social networking. In fact, outlinking to website content was far more prevalent than outlinking to posts on social networking platforms. In addition to widening the policy focus to include these other service types, it is also important to understand the inter-connected nature of online ecosystems. Take a type of online entity that does not appear in Table 4: file-sharing sites. File-sharing sites have been described as "black boxes" that are utilized to "enable the rapid redistribution of content even under conditions of drastic policing and filtering."[88] Whereas one file sharing site, web.archive.org, does appear in the top 30 list for AfD, there was no evidence of strategic use of file-sharing among AfD's and RN's followers' outlinking. Still, future research should probe further into the use of file-sharing sites like web.archive.org by online actors more broadly, particularly in situations where it may be used as a mechanism to avoid activities that would otherwise result in content disruption and deplatforming.

Question 2: Types of outlinked content—absence of explicit calls for violence or explicitly violent content

Our second question focused on the types of content confirmed far-right supporters of AfD and RN outlink to, including attention to the presence or absence of explicitly violent extremist, including REMVE, content. A key finding in this regard is that, while an array of the entities and content appearing in our overall dataset were assuredly anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, anti-Muslim, and Islamophobic, explicit calls for violence were absent, as was neo-Nazi content, which is plainly anti-Semitic and may also be held to have an implicit violence factor. It was not possible to determine why this was the case from the data gathered. It may be due, in part, to the public nature of Twitter as a social media platform and the platform's content moderation and deplatforming practices, as compared to less stringent policies that may be in place in encrypted or other web content platforms. It could also suggest that this type of content may simply not be shared or necessarily promoted within this portion of these far-right online ecosys-

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87   Birgitte P. Haanshuus and Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, "Recontextualising the News: How Antisemitic Discourses are Constructed in Extreme Far-right Alternative Media," *Nordicom Review* 42, no. 1 (2021): 37-50, https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2021-0005.

88   Ahmad Shehabat and Teodor Mitew, "Black-boxing the black flag: anonymous sharing platforms and ISIS content distribution tactics," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no. 1 (2018): 97, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26343748.

tems, which in turn could suggest that the online ecosystems of far-right political party followers may be largely insulated and separate from those of more extremist or violent elements, rather than intertwined or connected.

News coverage of "real-world" events offers a factual grounding, and "mainstream" news outlets confer a sense of authority and legitimacy and can be used in support of wider narratives that seek to "Other" the out-group by homogenizing, stereotyping, and dehumanizing them. Regardless of intent, in place of explicit calls for violence, the prevalence of this type of content can function as a kind of "mood music" that could be considered potentially harmful, even if not explicitly violent. This speaks to the need for greater awareness, media literacy, and consideration of efforts aimed at appropriately tagging misinformation and disinformation.

Still, there are a number of additional likely reasons for the absence of explicit calls for violence in the data analyzed herein. First, it is possible that our focus on European accounts and users had a lessening effect, given the stringent online hate rules in many European countries and relevant EU legislation. Second, and relatedly, it may be that online ecosystems are actually more separated from each other than we would otherwise think. Would we have seen the same findings, for example, if our focus was on far-right street movements, rather than on followers of the official Twitter accounts of two—albeit far-right—political parties? Third, it is possible that our choice of platform impacted the findings: Twitter has considerably ramped-up its deplatforming of far-right users in recent years, especially in the wake of the January 6, 2021 events at the U.S. Capitol, and users know this. This may mean that explicitly REMVE-supporting Twitter accounts are rarer on the platform than they once were, as such users have either been deplatformed and/or migrated elsewhere. It could also mean that supporters of REMVE are seeking to avoid deplatforming by moderating the positions they express on Twitter, including their out-linking activity.

Important to considering these possibilities is that just shy of 5% of all links across both follower networks were no longer accessible. Explanations for this may include the link having been deleted by the user or removed by the host platform, the user that posted the content choosing to close their account or having their account suspended/terminated by the platform, or the content having been moved elsewhere rendering the original URL redundant. In most instances it was not possible to identify which of these reasons, or others, might have applied to the inaccessible content in our dataset(s). What is clear is that there were no more than a small minority of cases in which content was removed by the host platform in the period between the outlink being posted and the completion of the analysis for Table 7. Again, there are different possible explanations: it may be that such content was not being uploaded in the first place, for example, either through user choice or because it was being blocked at the point of upload.

Question 3: Comparing and contrasting far-right AfD and RN Twitter followers—U.S. and Russian influences, low transnationalization

Our final question was comparative, seeking to examine the similarities and differences between the two parties' explicitly far-right Twitter followers. There were ten shared top-level domains that appeared in the top 30 lists for both AfD and RN. Along with the overall most outlinked to top-level domain youtube.com and its far-right video sharing clone bitchute.com, the other double entries were the giant social networking platforms facebook.com and instagram.com, the Telegram instant messaging application, the bit.ly URL shortener, the follower-tracking service fllwrs.com, the automated posting service dlvr.it, the state-owned Russian news channel rt.com, and the regional German newspaper wz.de (discussed previously). In addition to AfD and RN's Twitter follower networks being fairly distinct, the relatively low number of hostnames that appeared in both top 30 lists indicates that the pro-far right users in these networks largely prefer different online spaces. For example, the five far-right news sites in the AfD top 30 were different from the five far-right news sites in the RN top 30. To an extent, this is unsurprising, given the different languages involved. Having said this, two of the far-right news sites in the AfD top 30 list were in the English language (breitbart.com and voiceofeurope.com), but neither of these appeared in the top 30 list for RN. The multi-language far-right newspaper *Epoch Times* also only appeared in the AfD top 30 list (albeit the German-language version). While outlinks to Telegram channels were few overall, one-fifth of the channels outlinked to by RN users were included amongst the 18 channels outlinked to by AfD users, suggesting that, while there is limited overlap between the pro-far-right Twitter follower networks of AfD and RN, the two may have other networks in common with which they both interact. While transnationalization was relatively low overall, two aspects of it are worth further comment: Russian and U.S. actors and influences.

Russian Media Connections

RT appears in the top 15 most outlinked to online spaces by both the AfD and RN followers in our dataset(s), in terms of both number of tweets and number of distinct links (see Tables 2 and 3). Though not appearing on the AfD top 30 list, *Sputnik News* also enters RN followers' top 30 listing. The Russian-owned VK social networking site appears at number 30 on the RN top 30 list as well (see Table 3). Scholars have described *RT* as "one of the most important organizations in the global political economy of disinformation,"[89] while a 2018 NATO report implicated both *RT* and *Sputnik* in a wide array of meddlesome and polarizing activity, especially around elections and referenda in EU member states, along with the UK and the US.[90] While it is difficult to determine the exact reach of these outlets in France and Germany, a comparison between *RT* and *Le Figaro* is revealing: *Le Figaro* is France's most popular news

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89   Mona Elswah and Philip N. Howard, "Anything that Causes Chaos": The Organizational Behavior of Russia Today (RT)," *Journal of Communication* 70, no.5 (2020): 623–645, https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqaa027. Disinformation is information that is intentionally false and intended to deceive or mislead.

90   NATO Science and Technology and Committee (STC), *Russian Meddling in Elections and Referenda in the Alliance,* 2018, https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=sites/default/files/2018-11/181%20STC%2018%20E%20fin%20-%20RUSSIAN%20MEDDLING%20-%20DAVIS%20REPORT.pdf.

website, estimated to reach 22.3% of French internet users, and which appears at number 5 on RN's top 30 list. This is just 10 slots above *RT* at number 15, however, pointing to the outsized appeal of *RT* among confirmed far-right followers of RN as compared to the general French online audience, around 1.5% of whom it is estimated to reach.[91] Researchers have also found Western right-wing extremists migrating to Vkontakte (VK), a Russian social media site, in the wake of crackdowns on such content on major Western platforms, pointing out that while the Russian government suppresses online content hostile to it, it does not discourage the activity of foreign extreme right users or groups.[92]

U.S. MEDIA CONNECTIONS

A U.S. connection is also apparent, which is relatively unsurprising given the US is the Western democracy with not only the largest number of what Heft et al. term "online right-wing news sites" but also the most active ones.[93] This U.S. connection also has a disinformation and additional misinformation[94] angle. While the Russian actors prominent in the AfD and especially RN follower networks are state-controlled, the U.S. actors are commercial entities. U.S. entities are much more apparent in the German than the French case, however, with *Breitbart* highly ranked in our curated AfD follower network's top 30 on the basis of both number of tweets (no.18) and number of distinct links (no.15) (Table 2), but not appearing in the RN top 30 at all (Table 3). Even higher in the AfD top 30 rankings is the German language version of the Falun Gong-associated *Epoch Times*, appearing at number 15 and number 11, respectively (Table 2). Again, the *Epoch Times*, which *The New York Times* has described as "a global-scale misinformation machine that has repeatedly pushed fringe narratives into the mainstream,"[95] is absent from the RN top 30 listing. While *Breitbart* has been regularly identified as a core node in the transnational right-wing news ecosystem,[96] our findings regarding the New York-based *Epoch Times*' high ranking echo those of a 2018 study on AfD-centered Facebook discussions which found a similarly high frequency of use.[97] Also in the AfD dataset, just over half of the tweets that used the buff.ly service led to the conservative Christian satirical news site *The Babylon Bee*. One study of misinformation, satire, and social media has described stories published by the Florida-based publication as being "among the most shared factually inaccurate content in almost every survey we conducted."[98]

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91   Richard Fletcher, Alessio Cornia, Lucas Graves, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, "Measuring the Reach of 'Fake News' and Online Disinformation in Europe," *Reuters Institute,* February 2018, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/measuring-reach-fake-news-and-online-disinformation-europe.

92   Shelby Butt and Daniel Byman, "Right-wing Extremism: The Russian Connection," *Survival* 62, no.2 (2020): 137–152, https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2020.1739960.

93   Annett Heft, Eva Mayerhöffer, Susanne Reinhardt, and Curd Knüpfer, "Beyond Breitbart: Comparing Right-Wing Digital News Infrastructures in Six Western Democracies," *Policy & Internet* 12, no. 1 (2020): 20–45, https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.219; see also: Annett Heft, Curd Knüpfer, Susanne Reinhardt, and Eva Mayerhöffer, "Toward a Transnational Information Ecology on the Right? Hyperlink Networking among Right-Wing Digital News Sites in Europe and the United States," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26, no. 2 (2021): 484–504, https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220963670.

94   Misinformation is false or out-of-context information that is presented as fact without necessarily an intent to misinform or deceive.

95   Kevin Roose, "How The Epoch Times Created a Giant Influence Machine," *The New York Times,* October 24, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/technology/epoch-times-influence-falun-gong.html.

96   Heft et al, "Toward a Transnational Information Ecology on the Right?," 497.

97   Marko Bachl, "(Alternative) Media Sources in AfD-centered Facebook Discussions," *Studies in Communication | Media* 7, no. 2 (2018): 256–270, https://doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2018-2-128.

98   R. Kelly Garrett, Robert Bond, and Shannon Poulsen, "Too Many People Think Satirical News is Real," *The Conversation,* August 16, 2019, https://theconversation.com/too-many-people-think-satirical-news-is-real-121666.

The revealed differences in the AfD follower network's preferred online entities versus their RN counterparts point to the significance of national media ecosystems and the implications that their dissimilar structures and workings, including their differing international connections, may have in mainstreaming polarizing positions.

CONCLUSION

There has been a tendency with regard to research into the online far-right to focus on discrete platforms (e.g., Telegram, Twitter, YouTube), make connections between discrete types of online entities (e.g., websites), or explore the role of particular types of content (e.g., memes). Similarly, regulatory efforts have tended to focus on the removal of text, images, and videos from (the largest) social media platforms. Instead, an ecological approach seeks to supply a more thorough and consistent picture of, in this case, a portion of the European far-right online ecosystem(s). Our approach differs from previous ecological studies in two ways. First, it is one of the first studies to focus on the far-right in both Germany and France. Second, it takes a comprehensive approach—our three-layered analysis explores not just the top-level domains outlinked to by our sample of AfD and RN Twitter followers but combines this with analysis of the technical specifications of the content types outlinked to and treatment of the socio-political nature of the content arrived at by clicking on the most tweeted URLs. This results in the provision of a more thorough and cohesive view of this online ecosystem than contained in other similar studies.

Amidst a backdrop of concern and ire over COVID-19 restrictions, government surveillance, legal actions against European far-right entities and personalities, and continued nationalistic and anti-Islamic sentiments, our findings indicate that, by and large, explicitly pro-far-right followers of European far-right political parties', Germany's AfD and France's RN, official Twitter accounts tended to outlink predominantly to news and mainstream media reporting websites. The importance of both mainstream and fringe news websites as content sources and destinations should not therefore be discounted. In terms of popularity, these were followed by video sharing, social networking, URL shortening, social media marketing/posting/sharing, instant messaging, online petitioning, internet archiving, video streaming, personal blog and follower tracking. The studied users' top outlinked content focused on journalistic integrity, video game streaming, nationalism, anti-Islam narratives, anti-migration narratives, child exploitation, COVID-19 restrictions and conspiracies, and support for far-right groups and parties.

Importantly, we found no definitive data suggesting REMVE or violent extremist content, material, or support among the far-right ecosystems studied. While this does not definitively negate the possibility that REMVE actors and/or content exist within, exploit, and/or overlap with European far-right online ecosystems, it also provides no evidence to suggest this is the case. Even in the case of European far-right political party online ecosystems, the data collected suggests relatively little overlap between the out-links of the AfD and RN followers analyzed, despite their outlinking to similar website types.

Future research should assess the extent to which this finding holds on a similar sized and curated sample of followers of, for example, one or more official non-European far-right party Twitter accounts. In

addition, future research could identify a similarly sized far-right Twitter user cohort that is not political party-linked and run the same analyses for comparison. To determine whether the selection of Twitter as a gateway platform inevitably skewed our data away from REMVE content, future research could also use broadly the same three-layered analytical approach as applied here but focusing on a different "gateway" platform that does not regulate REMVE or violent extremist content to the same extent as Twitter. The Telegram messaging application may work for this purpose. Relatedly, future research could utilize this same methodology on a group of identified violent extremist far-right or REMVE supporters to compare the types of platforms utilized, types of content outlinked to, and identify any overlaps existing between those and far-right political party online ecosystems.

Finally, the lack of evidence of violent extremist exploitation of these online platforms or explicitly violent content in our dataset does not negate the polarizing qualities of the content found, nor, ultimately, the risk to some users of immersion in an online ecosystem producing a steady 24/7 drumbeat of hateful and anti-minority sentiment. Efforts to construct and denigrate the "Other" on mainstream platforms such as Twitter—whether that be immigrants, refugees, Muslims, or some other out-group—warrant further attention, as does the sharing of news articles that can have the effect of justifying and rationalizing these sentiments. Greater attention to these issues is needed from research, practice, and policy communities to better understand their impacts and implications for broader social and policy-oriented goals.

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