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EU Internet Forum
Technical meeting on violent right-wing extremism online

5 May 2020

Background and questions to participants

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The internet and the multiple online channels are important communication tools for violent right-wing extremists online. For instance, the Christchurch terrorist broadcasted his attack live, published his manifesto on a notorious message board popular with extremists, enabling a massive sharing of the horrific live images of the attack and a wide audience. The digital universe of violent right-wing extremism is expanding. The aim of this meeting is to bring together members of the EU Internet Forum to get an overview of the challenges relating to violent right wing extremist content as well as to explore future needs for research and technological development.

According to a VOX Pol study, "*Right-wing extremists' persistent online presence: history and contemporary trends*"[1]*,* violent right-wing extremists have been active users of the Internet since the beginning, following the evolution of the online environment, from their first websites to the current encrypted messaging apps or message board forums. Although research on the use of digital tools by violent right-wing extremists is in their early stages, first findings are meaningful. With the development of the hyper-connected society through a wide range of tools (e.g. social media, from Twitter to gab; image board websites like 4chan or 8kun; encrypted messaging apps), violent right-wing extremists are able to share their ideologies, recruit new members and disseminate their propaganda and narratives on a global scale.[2] They build a common culture and identity through graphic content on discussion threads of forums (e.g. memes, hate speech hidden behind sarcastic humour).

Lines between violent right-wing extremist ideologies and segments of the populist right sometimes tend to be blurred, complicating the differentiation of legitimate political opinion from extreme hate speech.[3] This situation allows an acceleration of the radicalisation process and a higher risk that extremists carry out violent actions or terrorist attacks.[4] The variety of actors, groups and language used also pose a challenge to the detection technologies currently available.

At the same time, the development of the Internet enabled the booming of conspiracy theories. These theories may feed violent right-wing extremist ideologies, fuelling xenophobic and racist discourse targeting foreign and religious communities, including Jews, Muslims, or, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Asians and migrants.[5] The mass murderers of Christchurch, El Paso, Halle and Hanau referenced conspiracy theories alleging migrants' invasion and threat towards white populations. In addition, successive lone actors referenced the Christchurch attack, following a gamification process of violence. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates the ability of violent right wing extremist groups to adapt their narratives and leverage the crisis to strengthen

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[1] Maura Conway, Ryan Scrivens, Logan Macnair, *Right-Wing Extremists' Persistent Online Presence: History and Contemporary Trends*, 25 November 2019

[2] White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement, Soufan Center, September 2019

[3] Bharath Ganesh, Right-Wing Extreme Digital Speech in Europe and North America, in *Extreme Digital Speech: Contexts, Responses and Solutions*, VOX Pol, 2019

[4] Blyth Crawford, Florence Keen, The Hanau Terrorist Attack: How Race Hate and Conspiracy Theories Are Fuelling Global Far-Right Violence, in *Fuelling Global Far-Right Violence*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, CTC Sentinel, March 2020

[5] Institute for Strategic Dialogue, *Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing N°2*, 9th April 2020

their recruitment efforts.

To facilitate a discussion of the multi-faceted nature of violent right-wing extremist activity on the Internet, and in consideration of some examples of the type of content associated with violent right-wing extremists (see Annex), the following questions need to be posed:

1.   What do we consider to be right-wing terrorist or violent right-wing extremist content?

The multiple shapes of violent right-wing extremism online invites us to reflect on the definitions of the content that should be considered as harmful or illegal material. Violent right-wing extremists use specific language, symbols, images, political satire and sarcasm as well as glorification of violent acts.
In this context, what are the difficulties Members States and industry are facing to assess such content online and what are the differences in tackling violent right-wing extremist content as opposed to jihadist content?

2.   What about smaller platforms hosting violent right-wing extremist content?

A focus on the case of smaller platforms hosting large communities of violent right-wing extremists is necessary considering the difficulties to engage with some of those platforms (eg. 4chan or Gab) and the difficulties for some platforms to develop their own technologies to address the issue.

3.   What are the available tools and technologies to detect violent right-wing extremist content?

Researchers and industry have already developed technologies to help detect and remove illegal content. There are automatic and semi-automatic techniques to detect and analyse content, based on keywords or machine learning as well as network based technologies. It is important to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of such techniques, vis-à-vis efficiency as well as accuracy of these methods and their ability to take into account context.

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