

PERSPECTIVE | EXPERT INSIGHTS ON A TIMELY POLICY ISSUE
DECEMBER 2021

THE ONLINE EXTREMIST ECOSYSTEM

Its Evolution and a Framework for Separating Extreme from Mainstream

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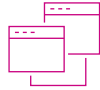


Nearly three-quarters of Americans regularly use social media to communicate with friends, connect with like-minded communities, and access entertainment.¹ Platforms such as Facebook and YouTube are so popular that it would be difficult to find someone unfamiliar with them, but a growing number of internet users also engage with alternative or emerging forums. These platforms appeal to users for a variety of reasons. Some offer a new functionality, an enhanced privacy policy, or a new business model that is more attractive to consumers increasingly concerned about the misuse of personal data.² Others cater

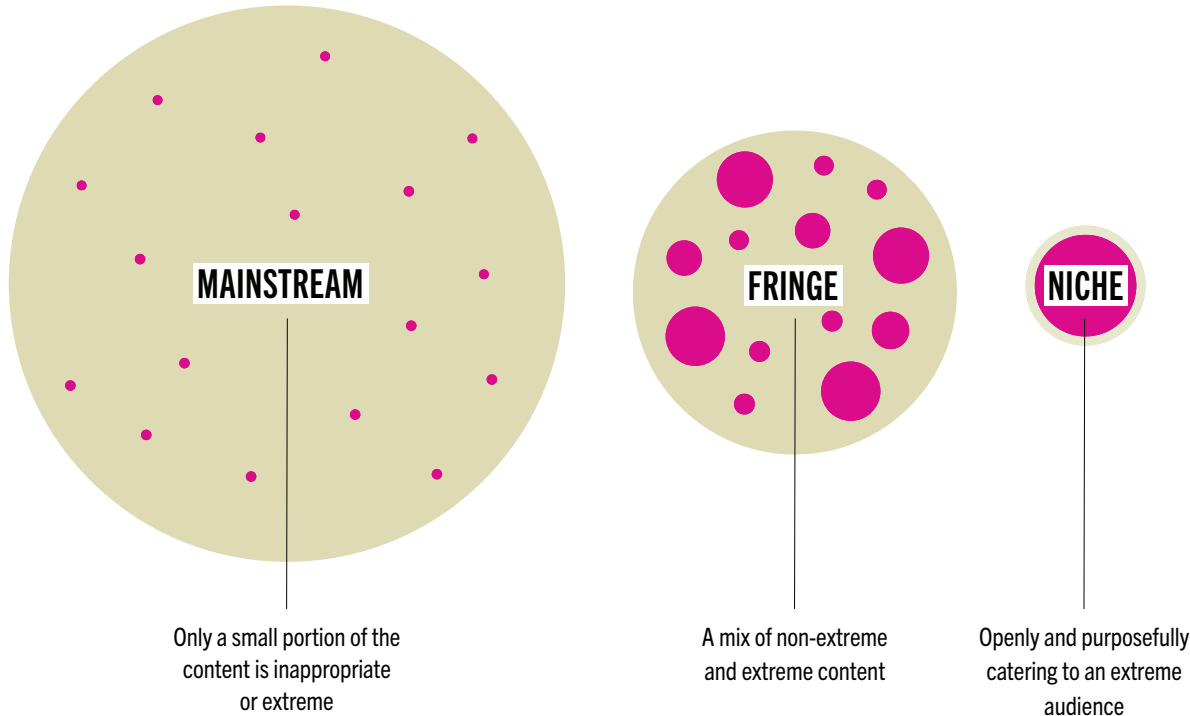
to a specific group or gain appeal as an emergent and trendy option. And some platforms provide a welcoming habitat for internet users who, because their speech is violent, hateful, or otherwise incendiary, have had their access to the most popular social media sites restricted, suspended, or permanently terminated.

The variety of social media platforms available to internet users today provides real benefits. For instance, seeking alternative sources of information and engaging with varied communities can counteract the fact that social media platforms often function as echo chambers for ideas.³ The development of

When extremists seek to disguise themselves as mainstream, how can one gauge whether social media platforms are catering to extremist ideas?



alternative platforms, however, has also opened opportunities for extremist movements to exploit. Since the early days of the internet, extremists have proven themselves to be effective adopters of social media technology as tools to create and disseminate material, attract and radicalize adherents, organize virtual and real-world activities, and raise revenue, among other functions.⁴ As internet users flock to new or smaller internet communities, they may be exposed to more radical or unconventional ideas that are unwelcome or uncommon on larger platforms. Conversely, the growing popularity of



once fringe or alternative platforms can help to disseminate ideas previously considered taboo or unacceptable, bringing them into the mainstream.⁵

In this environment, it is difficult for an average user to gauge the credibility and character of platforms they frequent. Online platforms develop reputations, but these often are based on general perceptions of the platform's founders or fan base that may reflect biases or conceal relevant information from potential users. Some platforms explicitly cater to an extreme audience by branding themselves with supremacist, militant, or otherwise radical symbols, but many others simply claim to advocate free speech and to oppose what they perceive as censorship. (For example, the social networking service Parler promoted itself as a forum to "speak freely and express yourself openly, without fear of being deplatformed for your views." This proved an effective tactic to attract users who either were suspended from other social media platforms or feared they would be found in violation of their terms of service.⁶)

Given the effort of extremists to code or mask their messages, a person consuming social media may be primed unknowingly for a radical message. Indeed, extremists may intentionally seek to soften or code their message so as to circumvent content moderation, build greater numbers of sympathizers, and desensitize individuals to extremist concepts.⁷ At a time of increasing disagreement about facts and data, extremists can exploit distrust in formerly respected sources of information to present themselves as simply unconventional, rather than radical and violent. When extremists seek to disguise themselves as mainstream, how can one gauge whether social media platforms are catering to extremist ideas?

In this Perspective—the first in a forthcoming series by RAND on online white supremacist and violent misogynist material—we discuss how the internet has become a safe harbor for these views, and we introduce a framework that internet users can use to understand the likelihood that the social media platforms they engage with contain extremist content. (The next document in the series will be *How Extremism Operates Online: A Primer*.) We first provide a landscape of the online extremist "ecosystem," describing how the proliferation of messaging forums, social media networks, and other virtual community platforms has coincided with an increase in far-right extremist online activity.⁸ Next, we present a framework to describe and categorize the platforms that host varying amounts of extreme content as mainstream, fringe, or niche. Mainstream platforms are those for which only a small portion of the content would be considered inappropriate or extreme speech. Fringe platforms are those that host a mix of mainstream and extreme content—and where a user may readily come across extreme content that is coded or obscured to disguise its violent or racist underpinning. Niche platforms are those that openly and purposefully cater to an extreme audience.

We use *far-right extremists* as a collective term to refer to a shifting community of individuals and groups that espouse ideologies characterized by racial, ethnic, or nationalist supremacism; a belief that social inequality is natural or desirable; and support of conspiracy theories involving grave threats to national sovereignty, personal liberty, or a national or community way of life. This concept encompasses a variety of groups and movements, including racial and ethnic supremacists, such as neo-Nazis and other white supremacist movements; anti-government activists, such as the sovereign citizen movement, and entities that derive ideological agendas based on bias related to religion, gender, sexual orientation,

or immigration status. The boundaries between groups and movements are often fluid; individual far-right activists or groups may not adhere to all of these tenets, preferring instead to compile elements in a “salad bar” approach.⁹

UNDERSTANDING THE VIRTUAL EXTREMIST ECOSYSTEM

Extremist content can be found on web platforms of varying size, popularity, and functionality. Message forums, social networking platforms, streaming services, static websites, and encrypted communication applications enable white supremacists, anti-government activists, self-described “involuntary celibates” (incels), and other extremists to network with like-minded individuals, radicalize or recruit new adherents, coordinate actions, disseminate propaganda, and share training materials, among other functions.¹⁰ Far-right groups are active on major social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, as well as alternatives, such as Gab and Ruqqus, that mimic an existing mainstream platform’s look and feel but present themselves as a parallel online space.¹¹ For example, Ruqqus’s design and upvoting/downvoting mechanisms imitate those of Reddit, and Gab mirrors Twitter’s functionality. Some platforms may have been specifically designed by extremists for radical discourse, others are libertarian or commercially oriented ventures that tolerate extreme content in the name of free speech, and others still have been hijacked and co-opted by extremists.¹²

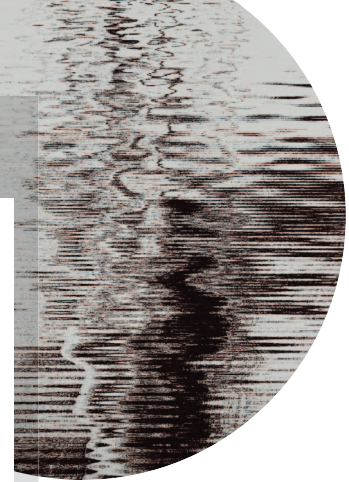
The resulting virtual ecosystem is dynamic. Far-right extremists have proven adaptive to the emergence of new technologies, websites, and virtual tools.¹³ Their attempts to

colonize new platforms, however, are often impeded by changes in content moderation policies, which can arise because of market pressures from the public, advertisers, or webhosts. These changes may be a specific response to extremist activity or driven by other exogenous factors shaping online spaces. “Deplatforming”—removing an extreme user’s accounts from a platform or forcing an extreme community off a server—often causes the community to migrate to a new forum. According to Tech Against Terrorism, a United Nations Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate initiative, this shift has accelerated since mid-2020 as improvements in social media platforms’ content moderation and increased deplatforming of extremist actors has pushed organizations and their supporters to small platforms and contributed to a resurgence of terrorist-operated websites.¹⁴ Although outside the scope of this Perspective, the question of whether deplatforming is effective in limiting the spread of extreme ideas or simply changes where this content is produced and disseminated remains an important topic of debate.¹⁵

To better understand the evolution of far-right activity on the internet, we conducted a review of press reports, published studies, and governmental documents related to extremist use of social media and other virtual technologies since the 1980s. We also identified more than 250 relevant events related to extremist use of the internet between 1984 and 2021 that either illustrated emerging dynamics or marked watershed moments. We identified five phases, each described in more detail below and illustrated in the timeline on pp. 12–13. Beginning with the advent of network computers, a small group of aspiring white supremacist influencers began to establish specialized, static websites and messaging forums. Their content became more user-driven after the emergence of social media in the mid-2000s, as activists exploited lax

MIGRATION TO LESS REGULATED PLATFORMS

Network analysis has found that a “rather massive” number of far-right users joined Telegram after major platforms, including Twitter and Facebook, began to impose new bans in 2019 (Aleksandra Urman and Stefan Katz, “What They Do in the Shadows: Examining the Far-Right Networks on Telegram,” *Information, Communication & Society*, 2020). A similar cross-platform analysis of Twitter and Gab found that engagement with extremist content on Gab increased after Twitter instituted a wave of account suspensions (Tamar Mitts, “Banned: How Deplatforming Extremists Mobilizes Hate in the Dark Corners of the Internet,” conference paper, National Bureau of Economic Research Summer Institute, July 26, 2021). This confirms similar analysis of the online activity of jihadists based in Spain, which found that the introduction of new barriers to use drove changes in which platforms extremists used over time (Manuel R. Torres-Soriano, “Barriers to Entry to Jihadist Activism on the Internet,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, June 21, 2021). Others have suggested that the content-production tactics employed by far-right groups may make them more resilient to interruption (Maura Conway, “Routing the Extreme Right: Challenges for Social Media Platforms,” *The RUSI Journal*, Vol. 165, No. 1, 2020).



moderation policies to reach new communities on mainstream social media networks and fringe messaging boards. The emergence of coordinated harassment campaigns, as well as a series of terrorist attacks by active social media users, led some technology companies to begin self-policing by the mid-2010s. Although content moderation generally was limited and uneven, these restrictions coincided with the emergence of new platforms that presented themselves as alternatives to popular social media networks, a trend often referred to as the “alt-tech movement.” A small number of extremist users also conducted violent attacks during this period or began organizing themselves into militant cells. Starting around 2020, extremists leveraged social media to mobilize large numbers of supporters to action offline.

PHASE I

Bulletin Board Systems and the World Wide Web 1983–2003

White supremacists’ adoption of online platforms began near the founding of computer networks in the early 1980s, when white power activists and militants such as George Dietz, Louis Beam, and Tom Metzger established public bulletin board systems (BBSs). The White Aryan Resistance organization, for instance, created its first computer bulletin board in 1985; by 1998, there were 258 websites devoted to white power.¹⁶ Louis Beam’s network Liberty Net, for example, allowed white supremacists to share strategies, literature, materials, advertisements, and potential targets for violence.¹⁷

Additionally, these sites gave activists in countries such as Germany and Canada access to white supremacist literature that was generally banned locally.¹⁸ White power organizing via BBS networks continued into the 1990s, but the practice eventually was eclipsed by mass movement onto the World Wide Web (WWW).¹⁹ In May 1995, Don Black, a former leader of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, transferred his BBS network to the WWW and established one of the most successful and longest-surviving white supremacist forums, Stormfront.²⁰ Stormfront quickly became a central node for white supremacist sites online, providing users with links to other white supremacist websites. White power activists and organizations created their own organizational pages and their own “quasi ‘news’ sites for a more general audience.”²¹

PHASE II

The Emergence of Social Media; Harassment and Trolling Prompt Limited Self-Regulation 2003–2014

As social media sites gained prominence and attracted larger user bases over the early and mid-2000s, white power activists, bands, and other groups joined mainstream platforms, including MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.²² Forums such as Stormfront endured, but others, such as the stand-alone Nazi social media network New Saxon, failed as users migrated to more sophisticated websites.²³

By the early 2010s, it was clear that the internet provided extremists an organizing mechanism to operationalize their hateful ideas and cause real-world harms. For supremacist activists, social media technology promised the ability to create and disseminate material on an unprecedented scale,

By the early 2010s, it was clear that the internet provided extremists an organizing mechanism to operationalize their hateful ideas and cause real-world harms.

carrying extremist ideas to new communities and radicalizing new adherents.²⁴ Before carrying out his July 22, 2011, mass attacks that killed at least 77 and injured hundreds, Norwegian terrorist and active Stormfront user Anders Breivik emailed his manifesto, “2083,” to two prominent Stormfront users.²⁵ Breivik later claimed his attacks were a “marketing method” to draw attention to the document, which encourages other white supremacists to distribute the text, spread its message online through social media and specialist websites, and build a dataset of enemies.²⁶ By September 2011, Alexander “Slavros” Mukhitdinov, a Russian neo-Nazi, had established Iron March as an online communications hub for the militant movement.²⁷ It is unclear whether the website’s founding was directly connected to Breivik’s appeal, but future violent extremists cited the Norwegian as an inspiration.²⁸

During this same period, anonymous troll-and-raid culture emerged as a significant feature of the web. Organized online harassment was popularized on sites such as 4chan and Reddit, which became nodes to organize mass harassment campaigns that often crossed from the virtual into the real world. Significant anonymous racist, white supremacist, and violent misogynist or incel content was created and shared on both platforms. At times, users generated their own movements to target others across multiple platforms.²⁹ In early 2013, for instance, subscribers to a subreddit utilizing a racial slur as its title organized a racist “brigading” of the r/black-girls and other subreddits, flooding the channels with a

deluge of obscene and racist content and targeting individual users with hateful private messages. Reddit banned the offending subreddit for its behavior in June 2013, but others adapted similar tactics.³⁰ In August 2014, 4chan and Reddit users organized a harassment campaign targeting Zoë Quinn, a game developer, after an ex-boyfriend published an incendiary post on 4chan.³¹ “Gamergate,” as the multiyear campaign became known, soon spread to other social platforms as participants expanded their abusive activities to include doxxing, swatting, and en masse postings harassing many female game developers, feminists, men of color, and other male allies.³² (*Doxxing* refers to revealing, typically online, private or identifying information about a person without their permission. *Swatting* refers to deceiving emergency services into sending police or other emergency teams to a harassment target’s address.) In September 2014, 4chan banned such organizing and prohibited discussion of Gamergate. Some users deemed this policy change a betrayal, and many angry users started using 8chan, a similar platform with even fewer restrictions, instead.³³

PHASE III

Increased Platform Self-Regulation Is Followed by Extremist Use of Fringe Platforms and the Weaponization of Social Media 2015–2017

Gamergate marked a turning point in technology companies’ approach to content moderation. Media scrutiny of the scandal focused public attention on the problem of online harassment, spurring calls for social media companies to improve content filters and enact stronger moderation policies. Perhaps more importantly, the controversy demonstrated how perceptions

that a company tolerated hateful content could tarnish its brand and harm a business’s bottom line. In 2016, multiple corporations reportedly withdrew bids to purchase Twitter over concerns that the website was unable to moderate the content it hosted.³⁴ That same year, the European Commission published a “Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online” to encourage technology companies to take “swift and stable” actions to address racist and xenophobic hate speech online.³⁵ According to a monitoring exercise undertaken that year, however, only 40 percent of reported content and 28 percent of independently identified qualifying content was removed within 24 hours.³⁶

The result of these events was a series of incremental and platform-specific technical features and moderation policies intended to block users from posting or viewing hateful and abusive content. In 2015, Reddit initiated new rules intended to rein in increasing hateful and extremist content on its platform, including establishing a content moderation policy, banning several notable harassment-oriented subreddits, prohibiting violent speech, and quarantining extremist content.³⁷ That same year, 8chan, which had become a popular forum for white supremacist content and harassment campaigns after 4chan’s moderation efforts, was removed from Google’s search results.³⁸ Starting around July 2016, Twitter began to ban high-profile accounts that incited or participated in harassment campaigns, and, in November 2016, Twitter announced that it would target hate speech on its platform.³⁹ In February 2017, Twitter unveiled a new set of features to allow users to report, filter, and block malicious content.⁴⁰

But neither supremacist movements nor internet trolls were the primary focus for social media regulators during this period. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), which proved more effective than antecedent al Qaeda

movements in producing propaganda, spurred an international effort to combat extremists' use of social media to raise revenue, recruit foreign fighters, and direct terrorist attacks in the United States and abroad.⁴¹ Working with foreign partners, the U.S. government pushed technology companies to implement safeguards, disrupt extremist organizing, and promote counter-radicalization messaging.⁴² Despite initial resistance, in 2017 Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube established the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) to help reduce the ability of terrorists and violent extremists to utilize digital platforms.⁴³ Though these same tools could have been applied to a range of extremist movements, these initiatives were dedicated predominantly to countering or degrading ISIS and other Islamist extremist activity.

With the attention of the U.S. government and social media companies focused on Islamist extremists, white supremacist and other non-Islamist extremist movements continued to inspire individual acts of violence, establish small militant cells, and organize mass demonstrations. On June 15, 2015, an active follower of the Daily Stormer carried out a mass shooting at a historically Black church in Charleston, South Carolina. In a manifesto published online, he claimed to have radicalized online after the Trayvon Martin killing in 2012 and accused the white supremacist movement of not taking sufficient real-world action.⁴⁴ Four months later, teenage Iron March users formed Atomwaffen Division, an accelerationist neo-Nazi organization that promotes the use of violence to overthrow the U.S. government and foment a race war. (As used by white supremacists, *accelerationism* refers to the idea that adherents should encourage social upheaval and hasten the demise of current systems of government to encourage the creation of a new society.) This group has since been linked

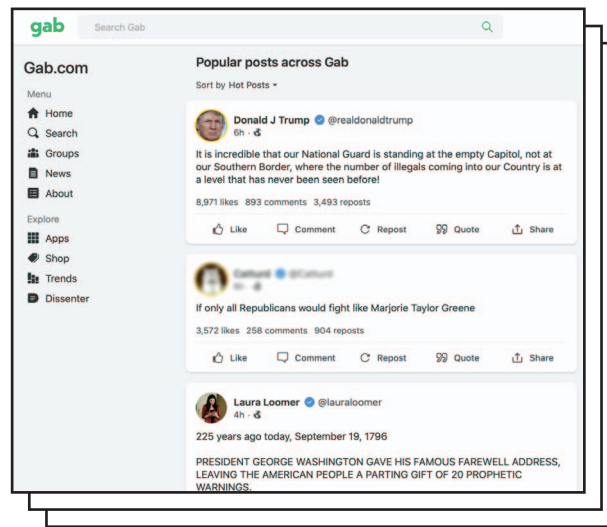
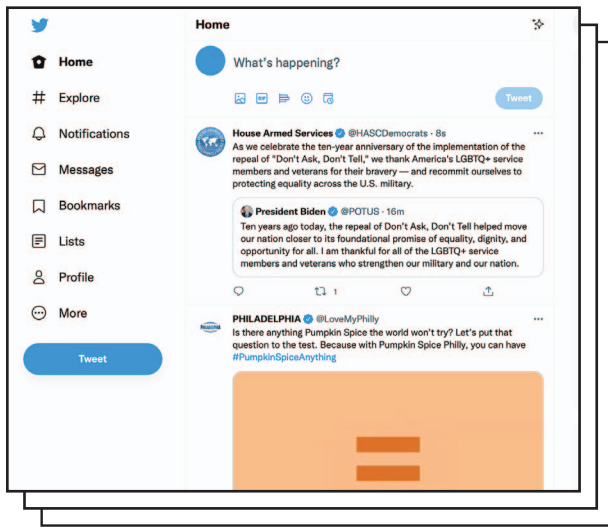
to several murders and plots against critical infrastructure, inspired transnational offshoots, and been designated a terrorist group in Canada and the United Kingdom.⁴⁵ In August 2017, the Unite the Right rally attracted alt-right, neo-Nazi, militia, neo-confederate, KKK, and other far-right organizations to Charlottesville, Virginia. After clashes between protestors and counter-protestors, a neo-Nazi rammed counter-protestors with his vehicle, killing one person and injuring 35 others.⁴⁶

Concurrently, alt-tech platforms emerged to cater to users enraged by mainstream platforms' new restrictions and enforcement of bans on select speech and activities. Unlike their predecessors, this new generation of technology companies marketed themselves as unrestricted forums, rather than offering access to new features. (On the contrary, several websites were structured almost identically to popular social media platforms.) Established in 2014, Reddit look-alike Voat became popular among subscribers frustrated with Reddit's tightening moderation policies.⁴⁷ In August 2016, Twitter mimic Gab was established as a self-proclaimed "free speech platform."⁴⁸ These alternative platforms initially struggled to attract new users but would gain loyal user bases in the next few years.

PHASE IV

Far-Right Spaces, Market Pressure for Self-Regulation, Cell Proliferation and Infiltration, and Violent Action 2017–2019

The August 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, galvanized technology companies to disrupt white supremacist organizing online. In the aftermath, Facebook, which had removed the event page for the demonstration



Some alt-tech platforms imitate existing options, as Gab does for Twitter and Ruqqus does for Reddit.

shortly before it occurred, began to remove related pages and to restrict sharing of links to articles mocking the victim of the Charlottesville attack.⁴⁹ Discord, a text and voice chat platform that began as a gamers' community, started banning white supremacist servers and accounts.⁵⁰ And Twitter, facing allegations that it had facilitated organizing of the Charlottesville demonstrations, announced "new rules to reduce hateful conduct and abusive behavior," though by then many far-right users had already relocated to Gab.⁵¹

While social media companies expanded their efforts to monitor extremist activity on their websites, other technology companies began to target the infrastructure that supported supremacist and anti-government movements. Website-building and -hosting company Squarespace removed white supremacist sites from its platform, and both Apple and PayPal announced they would work to prevent white supremacists from using their payment-processing infrastructure to raise funds.⁵² The Daily Stormer was pushed off the clearnet—that is, the publicly accessible internet that is indexed by traditional search engines, as opposed to the dark

web, which is not—after it was blacklisted by domain hosting and webservice companies, including GoDaddy, Google, and Cloudflare. For six months, the site bounced among domains as it was continuously banned by various clearnet registrars.⁵³ Stormfront was forced temporarily offline after its domain holder of 20 years blocked the website,⁵⁴ before resurfacing a month later with a new site host.⁵⁵ Similarly, Gab was forced to a new domain registrar.⁵⁶ In November 2017, Iron March shut down for unclear reasons, possibly in part because of attacks by vigilante hackers.⁵⁷

But, in the years that followed, neo-Nazi and white supremacist organizing and communication on various platforms continued. Violent attacks by right-wing extremists began to rise, outpacing the threat from jihadist terrorists in both number of attacks and fatalities⁵⁸—a phenomena terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman has called the "propellant" effect of social media.⁵⁹ Multiple violent actors used alternative platforms to share manifestos and promote their violent acts in hopes of gaining personal infamy and encouraging others to follow suit.⁶⁰

Although service providers continued to reactively impose bans or restrictions in the wake of high-profile violent incidents, extremist groups often adopted by migrating their activities to new platforms or developing new tools to sustain their online operations. After it was revealed that the perpetrator of the October 27, 2018, attack on the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was an antisemitic Gab user who had posted a manifesto on the website hours before, the website was banned by its domain registrar, GoDaddy, and hosting service, Joyent. It was also prohibited from using the services of Stripe, Medium, Shopify, and PayPal and removed from both Apple and Google's app stores. Despite the disruption, Gab resumed operations after a week offline, and later that year released Dissenter, a browser and web application designed to enable users to circumvent content moderation on other platforms by providing a conversational overlay for any web page.⁶¹ 2019 brought a new spree of white supremacist shootings targeting a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand (March 15), a synagogue in California (April 27), and a Walmart store in Texas (August 3); in each incident, the perpetrator posted a manifesto on 8chan prior to carrying out their attacks.⁶² After the August shooting, Cloudflare ceased providing 8chan with protection from distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, prompting it to rebrand as 8kun and find an alternative domain registrar.⁶³ Cloudflare's chief executive said that the company acted out of obligation to try to help prevent future attacks, saying "we've seen a pattern where this lawless community has demonstrated its ability to create real harm and real damage."⁶⁴

Undeterred, Neo-Nazi accelerationist groups continued to use online platforms throughout this period to organize, advertise, and recruit for their cause and to expand transnational ties. In early 2018, Sonnenkrieg Division, a UK-based offshoot of Atomwaffen Division, announced its formation via

Gab. That same year, the accelerationist and neo-Nazi Feuerkrieg Division was established in the Baltics, although it claims members across Europe and the United States, and the paramilitary hate group the Base started operations in the United States and began recruiting members online, with the goal of organizing cells in Canada, Europe, and Australia.⁶⁵ The Base and Atomwaffen Division also held training camps inside the United States.⁶⁶ By early 2020, these groups each experienced setbacks as many members' online activity exposed their organizing, facilitating infiltration by law enforcement and antifascist activists and contributing to arrests.⁶⁷

PHASE V

Sustained Online Organized Mass Movements, the Reconstitution of Extremist Cells, and Government Focus on Domestic Terrorism 2020–Present

Domestic political events in the United States prompted sustained mass protest movements in 2020, most of which were organized on social media sites. Some demonstrations, such as the nationwide protests against police brutality and unequal policing, were largely peaceful, despite incidents of substantial property damage.⁶⁸ Others, including the demonstrations against government COVID-19 safety measures and state lockdowns that began in April 2020, were categorized by periodic outbursts of violence.⁶⁹ In Michigan in April 2020, Idaho in August 2020, and Oregon in December 2020, armed protesters stormed state capitol buildings.⁷⁰ Some online organizing groups for activists opposed to COVID-19 restrictions

also directed their activities against the Black Lives Matter movement.⁷¹

The most notable event occurred on January 6, 2021, when demonstrations to protest the outcome of the November 2020 presidential election culminated in a physical assault on the U.S. Capitol.⁷² Plans to storm the Capitol during the “Stop the Steal” rally had circulated on social networks, messaging apps, and forums including Gab, Parler, Telegram, Facebook, and TheDonald.win for weeks prior to the attack.⁷³ In the days following the insurrection, Facebook made rules against groups and users spreading election misinformation,⁷⁴ and Twitter began suspending accounts associated with the QAnon mass delusion.⁷⁵ Both platforms suspended accounts belonging to President Donald Trump for inciting violence (Facebook temporarily and Twitter permanently).⁷⁶ Parler was driven off the net after Amazon, Apple, and Google each ceased working with the platform because of the violent content and threats allowed on the platform.⁷⁷

Although many platforms make efforts to impede or eliminate white supremacist and other extremist content from being shared on their sites, uneven enforcement policies and the availability of more lenient alt-technology platforms allow these movements to continue organizing openly online.⁷⁸ Following Parler’s shutdown, many former users moved to other free messaging platforms, such as Signal, Telegram, Gab, Rumble, and MeWe.⁷⁹ Although degraded by law enforcement efforts, the Base and Feuerkrieg Division (or individuals acting as these groups) appear to have returned to recruiting and organizing via Telegram and other platforms.⁸⁰ Though Telegram made efforts to shut down some white supremacist channels on its platform following the Capitol Riot, its efforts do not appear to be systematic, and this content can still be found easily.⁸¹ Moreover, white supremacists appear

to be attempting to recruit and radicalize former Parler users that transitioned to the platform.⁸² There is some evidence of a parallel ideological convergence within QAnon communities on Telegram, some of which have embraced neo-Nazi ideologies since January 2021.⁸³

In the aftermath of the January 6, 2021, assault, the Biden administration rolled out new initiatives to counter online extremist activity. On May 7, 2021, the United States endorsed the Christchurch Call to Action to Eliminate Terrorist and Violent Extremist Content Online, joining a coalition of member governments, international organizations, and private technology companies that have pledged to combat malicious actors’ exploitation of the internet.⁸⁴ In its announcement, the State Department specified that “countering domestic violent extremism—including racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism—is a compelling priority.”⁸⁵ In its domestic terrorism strategy released the following month, the White House announced plans to increase information sharing with social media companies and to fund, plan, and implement digital programming intended to promote digital literacy and “strengthen user resilience to disinformation and misinformation online.”⁸⁶ Federal authorities reportedly also are exploring partnerships with nonprofit groups, research firms, universities, and technology companies to access, monitor, and analyze extremist chatter online.⁸⁷



Although many platforms make efforts to impede or eliminate white supremacist and other extremist content from being shared on their sites, uneven enforcement policies and the availability of more lenient alt-technology platforms allow these movements to continue organizing openly online.

FIGURE 1 TIMELINE

1983

1983–1984

White supremacists begin establishing bulletin board systems that anyone with a computer can access from anywhere.

1995

Stormfront is established by Don Black.



PHASE I 1983–2003



July 2011

Anders Breivik carries out two mass attacks in Norway after disseminating his manifesto calling for white supremacists to build networks online, establish their own websites, and build lists of enemies.

September 2011

Iron March, a global forum for neo-Nazis, is established by Alexander “Slavros” Mukhitdinov, a Russian neo-Nazi.

Early 2013

On Reddit, a racist subreddit community organizes and begins carrying out online “raids,” or coordinated trolling campaigns, targeting various other subreddits. In June, Reddit bans the offending subreddit.

August 2014

Gamergate—a multiyear harassment campaign targeting women game developers, feminists, men of color, and other male allies on various online platforms—begins.

September 2014

4chan bans organizing harassment campaigns or discussing Gamergate on its site. Organizers of the harassment campaign and other users move to 8chan.



PHASE II 2003–2014

May–June 2015

Reddit publishes new anti-harassment rules and bans five harassment-oriented communities. Some users angered by the bans and new policies transition to using Voat, a similar though less popular platform.⁸⁸

June 2015

A white supremacist carries out a mass shooting targeting Black worshippers at a church in Charleston, South Carolina. Before the shooting, he published a manifesto detailing his motivations and explaining how he radicalized online.

July–August 2015

Reddit bans explicitly violent content and creates a mechanism to quarantine offensive content.

April 2016

Andrew Anglin, a neo-Nazi writer for the Daily Stormer, directs his followers to launch harassment campaigns in a manner that appears to have been informed by the Gamergate harassment campaign.

July 2016

Milo Yiannopoulos is banned from Twitter after inciting followers to harass Leslie Jones, a Black comedian and actress. The decision marks a shift in Twitter’s attitude toward inciting harassment on its platform.

August 2016

Gab is founded as a “free speech” platform, without the user restrictions of Twitter.

PHASE III 2015–2017





August 2017

Public outcry after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, draws action from tech companies. Many begin denying use of their services or removing white supremacist users from their platforms.

October 2018

Gab loses access to various tech services, bringing the site down and harming its ability to raise funds, the day after one of its users posted an antisemitic manifesto and then carried out a mass shooting targeting Jewish worshipers at a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

August 2019

8chan is forced offline when various tech services platforms ban it from using their servers after multiple white supremacist users post manifestos on the site prior to carrying out mass attacks.

November 2019

8chan returns as 8kun after being mostly offline since August.

Early 2020

Law enforcement significantly disrupts the Base and Feuerkrieg Division, striking significant blows to the international white supremacist and accelerationist militant movement.

PHASE IV 2017–2019

April 2020

Anti-lockdown activists in the United States begin to use social media and messaging applications to organize protests against state public health regulations enacted to restrict the spread of COVID-19.

May–June 2020

Black Lives Matter protests sweep the United States in response to the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a Minneapolis police officer.

November 2020

President Trump loses the United States presidential election but refuses to concede. Seeking to overturn the election result, his followers begin protesting and organizing the Stop the Steal movement.

January 6, 2021

After weeks of organizing and planning online, supporters of President Trump from a variety of movements storm the U.S. Capitol in an effort to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

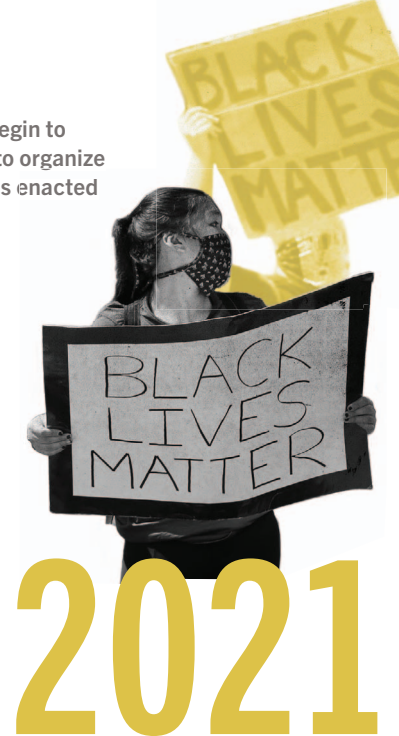
January 2021

Various tech platforms and social media sites take significant steps to eliminate content promoting false allegations of a conspiracy to rig the 2020 election. Additionally, some sites deemed to have failed to properly police their platforms are cut off from critical tech services and forced offline.

June 2021

The Biden administration releases a national strategy on countering domestic terrorism that includes provisions targeting extremists' use of social media and other internet platforms to radicalize, recruit, and organize.

PHASE V 2020–PRESENT



DESIGNING A SCORECARD



Even as technology companies seek to tighten their content moderation policies, the scale of the internet, the pace of new platform creation, and the adaptability of extremist groups will ensure that related material will continue to circulate at some level. For this reason, the 2021 National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism underscores the importance of decreasing social demand for this material and developing resilience to the associated misinformation, disinformation, and other malicious content that circulates online. As the strategy outlines, “Today’s digital age requires an American population that can utilize essential aspects of Internet-based communications platforms while avoiding vulnerability to domestic terrorist recruitment and other harmful content deliberately disseminated by malicious actors online.”⁸⁹

THE NEED FOR MEDIA LITERACY

Perhaps contrary to expectations, young internet users also score poorly on tests of their ability to evaluate the accuracy of online content. In one assessment of 3,446 U.S. high school students, 90 percent scored no points on four of six exercises designed to test their ability to evaluate digital sources on the open internet (Joel Breakstone, Mark Smith, Sam Wineburg, Amie Rapaport, Jill Carle, Marshall Garland, and Anna Saavedra, *Student's Civic Online Reasoning: A National Portrait*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford History Education Group, November 14, 2019).

Yet the dynamism of the extremist ecosystem makes it difficult for the average internet user to understand their relative risk of exposure to extremist content and to make informed decisions about the platforms they choose to use. Research on the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories suggests that most people struggle to distinguish between true, false, and misleading content online and are therefore susceptible to unintentionally sharing incendiary or propagandic material. This problem, as behavioral scientists David Rand and Gordon Pennycook have written, is “likely exacerbated on social media, where people scroll quickly, are distracted by a deluge of information, and encounter news mixed in with emotionally engaging” content.⁹⁰

Similarly, internet users may not recognize that they are engaging with propaganda or other manipulative content intended to radicalize and recruit adherents. Although some websites prominently display well-known extremist symbolism and hate speech, this activity can also take on more subtle forms, particularly on platforms that attract a broad audience. Indeed, some extremists purposefully seek to conceal or obfuscate ownership of a website or authorship of digital content in order to generate trust and “deliberately disguise a hidden political agenda.”⁹¹ The problem is compounded, as media scholar Adam Klein has noted, by the way in which search engines and social networks present users with malicious or misleading information that was “designed for them to appear as educational, political, scientific, and even spiritual in nature.”⁹² And thanks to the internet’s “interconnected information superhighway” of search engines, URL-sharing functions, and other internet-based tools that connect mainstream and extremist websites, information seekers typically are only a few clicks away from unfamiliar digital territory.⁹³

A variety of digital literacy tools have been created to teach internet users how to identify the warning signs that virtual content is manipulative, misleading, or false.⁹⁴ Yet there are few platform-level tools to guide internet users’ decisions about which websites, applications, or forums to engage with initially. In the current environment, labels such as *mainstream* and *alternative* are often ascribed haphazardly. Popularity and brand recognition are relevant attributes of a mainstream platform, but they should not be the only ones.

To promote digital literacy and enable individual internet users to better evaluate the credibility of the websites or platforms they frequent, we sought to develop an objective standard to categorize platforms based on their receptiveness to hosting extremist content. Recognizing that some platforms popular with violent or hateful extremists did not originally seek to host these communities, we identified attributes that can make platforms more or less vulnerable to appropriation. We also considered measures that reflected the fallout and consequences of a platform becoming a haven for bad actors. The resulting criteria assess virtual platforms’

popularity, accessibility, and tolerance or support for extreme online activity. Our framework is organized into four main categories, each encompassing several subcategories that we assigned a range of numerical values (Table 1). A platform's total score is the sum of the result for each subcategory. The higher the number, the more mainstream a platform; the lower the number, the more niche.

The first category is market penetration, based on the assumption that market penetration reflects a platform's ability to represent the general population views. We measured market penetration using three factors: volume of traffic, visibility, and the accessibility of a platform via Google search results.

- **Volume of traffic** was measured on a 4-point scale using Alexa.com, which tabulates the average daily number of U.S.-based visitors and page views in the prior 90 days. We defined a platform as large and assigned 4 points if it ranked within the top 1,000 sites on the internet. We assigned a platform 3 points if its 90-day U.S. rank placed it in the top 1,000–50,000 sites, 2 points if its rank was below 50,000, and 1 point if its U.S.-web traffic was immeasurably small. We selected the Alexa.com ranking as an appropriate measure of traffic volume, rather than number of unique users, because of its standard measurement across platforms and the ease of obtaining U.S.-specific data.
- **Visibility** was measured on a 3-point scale. We assigned a platform 3 points if it was a prominent, household name—one that even individuals who were not avid users of social media likely would recognize. We assigned a platform

2 points if it was frequently discussed in major national media or published research. We assigned 1 point if the platform was familiar only to specialized communities focused on this topic.

- **Google results** were measured on a 4-point scale. We assigned a platform 4 points if the first return of a Google search was a direct link to the website or platform. We assigned 3 points if the direct link was located on the first page (based on standard search preferences, the first ten search results), and 2 points if a direct link was on the second page (within results 11–20). We assigned 1 point if it had been removed by Google or was not listed in Google's first 100 results. We ensured that these searches were run in incognito mode, so that search results were not affected by a user's search history.

The second category is organizational control, with the assumption that transparency and efforts to self-police content are standard industry practices that are more characteristic of credible platforms. We measured organizational control using three factors: ownership, content policies, and content monitoring and moderation.

- **Ownership** was measured on a 3-point scale. We assigned 3 points if the platform's ownership or management information was widely available and publicized. We assigned 2 points if likely ownership or management information was discernible but not easily found. We assigned 1 point if ownership information was not publicly available or if purposeful steps had been taken to conceal ownership—for example, by referring to owners or administrators by their usernames only.

TABLE 1 FRAMEWORK FOR SCORING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

CATEGORY	SUBCATEGORY	SCORES
Market penetration	Traffic	1 point if too small to measure 2 points if small (rank lower than top 50,000) 3 points if medium (rank between 1,000–50,000) 4 points if large (rank within top 1,000)
	Visibility	1 point if familiar only within specialized communities 2 points if discussed in mainstream media or research 3 points if a prominent, household name
	Google indexing	1 point if the platform has been removed from Google or does not appear in the first ten results pages 2 point if a direct link is available on the second page or later 3 points if a direct link is available on the first page of search results 4 points if the first hit on Google is a direct link to the website or platform
Organizational control	Ownership	1 point if ownership information is not publicly available or is purposefully concealed 2 points if ownership or management information is available but is not easily accessed 3 points if ownership or management information is widely available and publicized
	Content policies	Cumulative (up to 4 total points): 1 point if the platform maintains terms of use and/or community guidelines 1 point if the platform explicitly prohibits hate speech 1 point if the platform explicitly prohibits violent threats 1 point if the platform prohibits illegal content
	Moderation/monitoring	1 point if the platform has no or an unclear mechanism for moderation 2 points if moderation is inconsistent and/or based on user reporting 3 points if content is routinely removed by active moderators
External pressure	Ads	Binary: 1 point if the platform hosts discerning advertisements; ^a 0 if it does not
	Shutdown	Binary: 0 points if the platform has ever been shut down; 3 if it has not
User base	Anonymity	1 point if no registration is required to post on the platform 2 points if username registration is required to post on the platform 3 points if email registration is required to post on the platform 4 points if additional identifying information (e.g., real name, phone number) is required to post on the platform
	Mission statement	Binary: 0 points if the platform has a description or mission statement that includes explicit references to supremacist movements and/or ideologies and/or condones the use of unlawful violence or force; 3 if it does not
	Iconography	Binary: 0 points if the platform has explicit visual iconography or name associated with extreme movements (such as a swastika); 3 if it does not

^a Platforms on which the only advertisements were for pornographic sites were awarded 0 points.

- **Content policies** were measured on a 4-point scale. We assigned a platform 1 point if it posted “terms of use” or community guidelines. We assigned more points for explicit prohibitions on hate speech, violent threats, or illegal content; a site with terms of use policies explicitly prohibiting all three categories received 4 points. A site with no posted terms of use or guidelines received 0 points.
- Recognizing that posting terms of use does not mean that such rules are enforced, we awarded points separately for whether **content monitoring and moderation** actually occurred. We assigned a platform 3 points if content violating its terms of use or seen as illegal was removed routinely, either because a platform actively employed individuals to do so, used algorithms to ensure that user policies were enforced, or both. We assigned 2 points if moderation occurs inconsistently, typically because content would only be removed if flagged by users. We assigned 1 point if there appeared to be no effort to moderate content on the platform.

The third category related to the extent to which a platform appeared vulnerable to external commercial pressure, with the assumption that the more extreme the content on a site, the more likely they are to be rejected by risk-adverse advertisers or web providers.

- We assigned a platform 1 point if it hosted **advertisements** and 0 points if it did not, if prominent companies had actively chosen to stop advertising on the platform, or if the platform had been blacklisted by advertising brokers.
- We assigned a platform 3 points if it had never been **shut down** by its web provider and 0 points if the plat-

form’s web provider had ever refused to host it because of extreme content.

Lastly, we evaluated the user base of the platform, in terms of whether the platform catered to a user’s ability to be anonymous or explicitly catered to an extremist audience.

- **Anonymity** was measured on a 4-point scale. We assigned a platform 4 points if it required a piece of identifying information beyond an email address (such as a real name or phone number) to post or participate in discussion on the platform. We assigned 3 points if the platform required only an email address to post material, 2 points if it required only a self-generated username, and 1 point if no registration was required to participate in platform conversations.
- A platform’s **mission statement** was evaluated on a binary measure, with 0 points assigned if the platform’s description or mission statement included explicit references to supremacist movements or ideologies, and 3 points if it did not.
- **Iconography** was also evaluated on a binary score, with 0 points awarded if the platform was named for an extreme movement or used visual iconography associated with extreme movements (such as a swastika) in its platform logo, description, or mission statement, and 3 points if it did not.

IDENTIFYING MAINSTREAM, FRINGE, AND NICHE PLATFORMS

The results of our analysis are provided in Table 2 and Figure 2. To ensure reliability between sections, coding was performed uniformly by one researcher. The results were reviewed for accuracy by two team members, but no adjustments were necessary.

We found a natural breaking point between platforms that intentionally cater to an open audience without prejudice to political or social viewpoints—essentially, platforms that are identity-agnostic—and those that knowingly cater to or define themselves as catering to individuals with specific political or social viewpoints. We define the identity-agnostic platforms as *mainstream*, and they scored 32 or more points in our framework. We define those that scored 31 or fewer points in our framework as being either *fringe* or *niche*. Fringe platforms are those that host a mix of mainstream and extreme content—and where a user might readily come across extreme content that is coded or obscured to disguise its violent or racist underpinning. Niche platforms are those that openly and purposefully cater to an extreme audience. Although, in our framework, there was only a 1-point difference between the lowest-scoring mainstream platform and the highest-scoring fringe platform, on a practical level, the types of discourse on mainstream versus other platforms and the types of users who may find these platforms appealing are dramatically different.

Determining a breaking point between fringe and niche platforms was more difficult because platforms in both categories—and certainly specific subforums within the fringe category—host very offensive content. Nonetheless,

several attributes contributed to the variation in platforms score and, in turn, the definition of the niche and fringe categories. Platforms in the niche category typically cater knowingly to an extreme community—some can be identified by their mission statements and iconography or name, and some are host to small communities and make little to no effort to moderate content. Size was not the only driver for determining whether a platform is fringe or niche, as there are some fringe sites catering to the violent misogynist/incel communities that are used by very small communities. Some fringe sites made a special effort to establish and enforce policies to dissuade threatening language or graphics, whereas niche platforms generally hosted explicitly violent content. We also identified two broad types of niche platforms: those on which content is primarily user-created and those that are hosted by a party or figure and used as a platform for pushing content in one direction. Given the difference in structure of the one-directional platforms, some of our criteria, such as content moderation, were less applicable.

Overall, we found that the most important variables for understanding the differences between fringe and niche platforms were content policies, content moderation, and the frequency and duration of platform shutdown because of criminal or offensive content. This aligns with previous research on the communication of conspiracy theories over the internet, which has similarly identified content regulation and platform shutdown as defining characteristics of non-mainstream platforms. Researchers Jing Zeng and Mike Schäfer describe “dark platforms” as those that practice “content liberation” by doing less to regulate their content; offer “exile congregation” by providing a forum for those expelled from other platforms; and have been ostracized from the infrastructure provided by major technology service providers.⁹⁵

TABLE 2 SCORECARD RESULTS

	TRAFFIC	VISIBILITY	INDEXING	OWNERSHIP	CONTENT POLICIES	CONTENT MODERATION	ADS	FORCED SHUTDOWN	ANONYMITY	MISSION	ICONOGRAPHY	TOTAL
MAINSTREAM												
Facebook	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	4	3	3	37
Twitter	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	3	3	3	36
Reddit	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	3	2	3	3	35
Tumblr	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	0	3	3	3	33
Discord	4	2	4	3	4	2	0	3	4	3	3	32
FRINGE												
MyMilitia	2	2	4	3	4	3	0	3	4	3	3	31
InfoWars	4	3	4	3	4	2	0	0	3	3	3	29
Parler	4	3	4	3	3	2	0	0	3	3	3	28
Gab	4	2	4	3	3	2	0	0	3	3	3	27
Infogalactic	2	1	1	3	3	3	0	3	3	3	3	25
Love Shy	1	1	3	1	4	3	0	3	3	3	3	25
Ruqqus	3	1	4	1	3	1	0	3	2	3	3	24
4chan	4	2	4	3	1	2	0	0	1	3	3	23
You're Not Alone	1	1	1	2	4	2	0	3	3	3	3	23

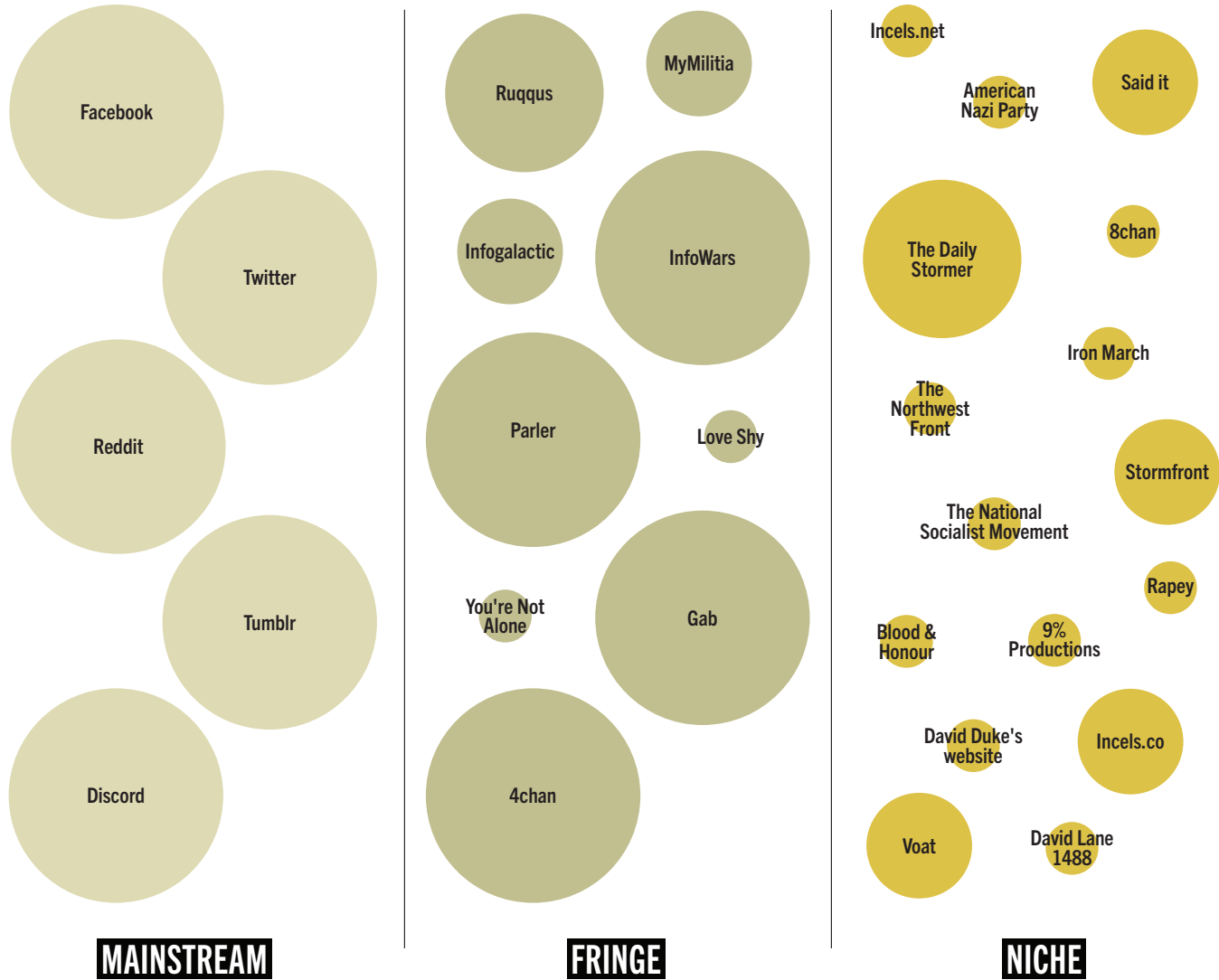
TABLE 2 SCORECARD RESULTS—CONTINUED

	TRAFFIC	VISIBILITY	INDEXING	OWNERSHIP	CONTENT POLICIES	CONTENT MODERATION	ADS	FORCED SHUTDOWN	ANONYMITY	MISSION	ICONOGRAPHY	TOTAL
NICHE – USER DRIVEN-CONTENT												
Said it	2	1	4	1	2	3	0	0	2	3	3	21
Incels.co	2	1	4	1	4	2	0	0	3	3	0	20
Incels.net	1	1	1	1	4	2	0	0	4	3	0	17
Stormfront	2	1	2	3	3	3	0	0	3	0	0	17
Voat	2	1	1	2	2	1	0	0	2	3	3	17
8chan	1	2	1	3	1	1	0	0	1	3	3	16
The Daily Stormer	3	1	2	3	2	1	0	0	3	0	0	15
Iron March	1	1	1	3	1	3	0	0	4	0	0	14
The Northwest Front	1	1	1	3	2	3	0	0	2	0	0	13
Rapey ^a	1	1	1	3	1	N/A	0	0	N/A	N/A	0	7
NICHE – OWNER DRIVEN-CONTENT												
American Nazi Party	1	1	3	3	1	1	0	3	4	0	0	17
The National Socialist Movement	1	1	1	3	0	N/A	0	3	4	0	0	13
Blood & Honour	1	1	3	1	N/A	N/A	0	3	4	0	0	13
9% Productions	1	1	4	1	N/A	N/A	0	3	N/A	N/A	3	13
David Duke's website	1	1	1	3	1	N/A	0	3	N/A	0	0	10
David Lane 1488	1	1	1	1	N/A	N/A	0	3	N/A	0	3	10

NOTES: "N/A" indicates "not applicable"—often because content was only one-directional. In the instance of Rapey, material was so offensive and explicitly criminal that we minimized our engagement with the platform and therefore could not evaluate it on each criterion.

^a Formerly Nearcels and ForcedBanana.

FIGURE 2 RESULTS OF SCORECARD ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS



SOURCE: Page view data from Alexa.com.

NOTES: Larger circles represent a higher number of page views, on a four-point scale, providing a measure of the popularity of each platform. The position of each circle within a column has no significance; they are scattered and spaced evenly for ease of presentation.

IMPLICATIONS AND UTILITY

Given the scale of the internet and the ease of producing and disseminating extremist content online, internet users are unlikely to be able to avoid this content entirely. However, this scorecard is one tool that can be used to navigate the internet, avoid malicious content, and help quarantine extremist activity. It contributes to a growing library of digital literacy tools that help internet users to improve their understanding of how the internet functions and to educate friends, family, and colleagues.⁹⁶

The scorecard's strengths lie in its simplicity, objectivity, and applicability to a wide variety of extremist movements. It can be used to guide decisions about which platforms to frequent and, by helping users avoid potentially traumatic images or rhetoric, help to control the social harms associated with this content. By providing a framework to evaluate the normalcy of specific platforms relative to other parts of the internet, it also offers a way for individual users to anticipate the type of content they might encounter and encourages the type of deliberate interaction that research suggests decreases individuals' susceptibility to misinformation.⁹⁷

Two important caveats are necessary, however. First, the scorecard is designed to help internet users assess the *relative* risk of exposure to extremist content when deciding among platforms, but even mainstream applications and websites contain hateful material. Mainstream platforms are likely to be more aggressive in removing or limiting the circulation of extremist content than fringe or niche platforms, but enforcement is uneven, and standards for what qualifies as hateful, violent, or extreme vary among technology companies.⁹⁸

A 2019 EU-funded monitoring exercise of four major technol-

ogy companies' compliance with the European Commission's Code of Conduct found that only 58 percent of hateful content identified and reported through normal user channels was removed.⁹⁹ In both relative and absolute terms, this suggests that a substantial volume of hateful content is still in circulation on mainstream platforms. Moreover, the size of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter dwarfs those in the fringe and niche categories, meaning that although less of the biggest platforms' content is extreme in relative terms, there might still be more extreme content in absolute terms than on fringe and niche platforms. Lastly, most enforcement tools are retroactive and do not prevent material from being posted and shared, read, or watched in the interim before it is removed. For example, Twitter's Transparency Report states that 3.8 million tweets were removed in the latter half of 2020 for violating Twitter's user rules, and over a third of the content removed was because it was hateful or violent.¹⁰⁰ The Twitter report highlights that only 17 percent of these were viewed between 100 and 1,000 times, and only 6 percent were viewed more than 1,000 times prior to removal—but, using these numbers as an absolute minimum, this means that the violating content was viewed at least 295 million times during this six-month period.

Second, this scorecard is designed to aid platform-to-platform comparisons rather than to capture the ways in which communities within a platform can vary, or the ways in which individual users might have very different experiences on the same platform. Because of the widespread use of content algorithms that tailor the presentation of information according to users' identified preferences, experiences of a platform may vary depending on activity history, privacy settings, social network connections, offline location, and other factors.¹⁰¹ Individual users may also consciously select to engage in micro-communities that deviate from the norm

of mainstream platforms. A user who selectively engages with hateful or discriminatory material—or who regularly engages with other users that do so—would have a greater risk of exposure to this content.

Despite these limitations, the scorecard can help internet users orient themselves to the internet and navigate around “high-traffic” nodes of the extremist ecosystem. Although niche platforms are problematic because of their explicitly violent and hateful content, fringe platforms are particularly dangerous because they might be the most likely breeding ground for radicalization. Fringe platforms do not explicitly brand themselves as supremacist—none in our analysis had a mission statement or used iconography explicitly supporting violence, and many of them had nominal content policies. However, these policies were often not enforced, and the platforms were used to promote problematic and coded content. Moreover, examining these platforms in the context of the history of the extremist ecosystem undercuts any claims that these platforms simply exist to promote free speech. As Reddit’s senior leaders stated after their platform struggled to manage the volume of violent and hateful content in the mid-2010s, “openness has enabled the harassment of people for their views, experiences, appearances or demographic backgrounds.”¹⁰² Users’ recognition that there is a greater potential for extreme material on these types of platforms can interfere with extremists’ attempts to attract followers by framing their ideas as mainstream and widely held.

Far-right activists use messaging forums, communication applications, and other platforms to establish the illusion that their ideas have attracted a large support base and are therefore credible and appealing. By identifying a platform as mainstream, fringe, or niche, an internet user is better equipped to understand whether the content they are con-

suming represents the constituency or consensus it might claim. Initiatives to constrain extremist content by mainstream platforms, online service providers, and the government are important, but the internet’s structure makes it nearly impossible for such information to be rooted out without vigilant content consumers. Despite the various efforts to deplatform extreme users from mainstream platforms and to force extremist platforms offline, extreme content continues to appear across the internet—in mainstream, fringe, and niche communities. Users recognizing content as dehumanizing, hateful, or violent—even when it is disguised as otherwise—can hopefully inhibit extremist propaganda by decreasing its appeal, limiting the inadvertent dissemination of extremist materials, and reducing demand.

NOTES

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- ⁴ European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, *European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2020*, The Hague, 2020, p. 24; Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, *The Fringe Insurgency: Connectivity, Convergence and Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right*, London, Washington, D.C., Beirut, and Toronto: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2017, p. 5.
- ⁵ Roderick Graham, “Inter-Ideological Mingling: White Extremist Ideology Entering the Mainstream on Twitter,” *Sociological Spectrum*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2016.
- ⁶ See Max Aliapoulos, Emmi Bevensee, Jeremy Blackburn, Barry Bradlyn, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Gianluca Stringhini, Savvas Zannettou, “An Early Look at the Parler Online Social Network,” *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 2021.
- ⁷ Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *Hate in the Homeland: The New Global Far Right*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2020, in particular Chapter 2. In a related phenomenon, terrorist groups have sought to “masquerade” as news organizations in order to disseminate content on popular platforms. An analysis of this tactic found that “the content posted by these networks is usually sanitised of direct references to terrorist organisations. Incriminating logos and images are obfuscated, and special characters are inserted into words to evade automated moderation” (Tech Against Terrorism, *Trends in Terrorist and Violent Extremist Use of the Internet: Q1–Q2 2021*, July 2021, p. 6).
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- ¹⁴ Tech Against Terrorism, 2021, p. 5.
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ABOUT THIS PERSPECTIVE

In this Perspective, the first in a forthcoming series by RAND on online white supremacist and violent misogynist material, we describe how the internet has become a safe harbor for these views and introduce a framework with which internet users can categorize the social media platforms they engage with and understand their potential to contain extreme content. We provide a landscape of the online extremist “ecosystem,” describing how the proliferation of messaging forums, social media networks, and other virtual community platforms has coincided with an increase in extremist online activity. Next, we present a framework to describe and classify the platforms that host varying amounts of extreme content as one of three categories: mainstream, fringe, or niche. Mainstream platforms are those where only a small portion of the content would be considered inappropriate or extreme speech. Fringe platforms are those that host a mix of mainstream and extreme content—and where a user might readily come across extreme content that is coded or obscured to disguise its violent or racist underpinning. Niche platforms are those that openly and purposefully cater to an extreme audience.

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About This Perspective

In this Perspective, the authors introduce a framework for internet users to categorize the virtual platforms they use and to understand the likelihood that they may encounter extreme content online.

The authors first provide a landscape of the online extremist “ecosystem,” describing how the proliferation of messaging forums, social media networks, and other virtual community platforms has coincided with an increase in extremist online activity. Next, they present a framework to describe and categorize the platforms that host varying amounts of extreme content as mainstream, fringe, or niche. Mainstream platforms are those for which only a small portion of the content would be considered inappropriate or extreme speech. Fringe platforms are those that host a mix of mainstream and extreme content—and where a user might readily come across extreme content that is coded or obscured to disguise its violent or racist underpinning. Niche platforms are those that openly and purposefully cater to an extreme audience.



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